

# QAA Educational Gain Collaborative Enhancement Project

## Educational Gain Project Report

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June 2024



This project report is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project is led by Imperial College London in partnership with Bath Spa University; Imperial College Union; Liverpool John Moores University; London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); The Open University; University of Birmingham; University of Cambridge; University of East Anglia; University of Exeter; University of Manchester; University of Plymouth; University of Portsmouth and University of Warwick. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).



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5. **Measuring Educational Gain.** What providers think can be measured, what measures they have available to them, how they are actually measuring gain, and the sorts of measurements they are using to do so.
6. **Evaluating Educational Gain.** What, if anything, they do with the data they collect and how they measure the effectiveness of their approach and assess the impact of the institution's efforts.

There are multiple examples of excellent and innovative practices being undertaken by providers as they seek to enable students to make educational gains, but, at times, educational goals (which are largely aspirational) are conflated by providers as educational gains. The distinction between these is commonly blurred.

Providers demonstrate a wide range of methods for defining and measuring educational gain, from using existing metrics such as degree or employment outcomes, to developing bespoke models focused on personal and professional growth. However, there is often a lack of alignment between the definition of educational gain, the domains articulated, and the evidence provided.

### **Key challenges**

There are significant challenges in relation to measurement and the use of evidence. The lack of standardisation and the varied quality of evidence used to support claims of educational gain means it is difficult to establish baselines or compare across providers.

In addition, while some institutions present robust data, others rely on less rigorous or partial reporting of metrics. Furthermore, the absence of baseline measures in many cases complicates the assessment of true educational gain, as submissions may indicate change but lack precise measurement between two points in time.

### **Recommendations and ways forward**

Overall, the report suggests the need for a more structured approach to defining and measuring educational gain, recommending the use of a schema that includes clear institutional size and shape, mission alignment, and data plans. Providers are also encouraged to reflect on strategic and operational considerations, such as monitoring the delivery of educational gain, developing action plans, and ensuring that goals are realistic and time bound. Finally, the importance of alignment across various elements of educational gain, including institutional goals, student aspirations, and measurable outcomes, is stressed to ensure a coherent and impactful approach.

Each section of the report provides a set of reflective questions and a set of recommendations for improving the articulation, support, and measurement of educational gain. These aim to support institutions in refining their strategies and practices to achieve meaningful and measurable educational gains to support students' growth and development, and to provide robust evidence of the wider outcomes from the investment in higher education.

## Introduction

This report is one of the outputs from the QAA Educational Gain Collaborative Enhancement Project<sup>1</sup>, further information on which can be found [here](#). A substantial body of research explores the concept of educational – or learning – gain, including a [literature review](#) completed as part of the overall project, as well as ways in which the sector might think about educational gain.

This report offers a critical and developmental analysis of how providers have approached educational gain (EG) in the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) [submissions](#). The TEF guidance for institutions about education gains was:

*The assessment of educational gains in TEF is based on information and evidence that a provider determines itself and includes in its submission. This could also be supplemented by information and evidence in the student submission.*

*The TEF assessment will consider:*

- *a provider's own articulation of the gains it intends its students to achieve*
- *its approach to supporting these educational gains*
- *any evidence of the gains achieved by the provider's students.*

*We recognise that there is currently no national measure of educational gain, and that many providers may not have developed their own approach to measuring the educational gains they deliver for their students. The approach to assessing educational gain in the TEF 2023 is intended to enable providers to demonstrate a clear articulation of their ambitions for educational gain, credible approaches for delivering this, and where possible evidence that it is delivered in practice. It is intended to allow providers time to establish their practice in measuring and evidencing educational gains, which could then become the focus of assessment in subsequent TEF exercises.<sup>2</sup>*

To note, institutions had fewer than four months from the point of receiving the guidance and completing their TEF submissions (due 24 January 2023). Although providers were encouraged to write about educational gain, they were not required by the Office for Students (OfS) to do so. Indeed a recent [post](#) by Wonkhe found that across the 157 submissions they explored, only around 75 per cent of providers engaged with the concept in some way.

Moreover, although projects such as this one have enabled institutions to think about educational gain, the OfS did not mandate how this should be approached or presented. It is unsurprising therefore that the submissions are extremely varied in how institutions describe their respective approaches to educational gain.

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<sup>1</sup> The QAA Educational Gain Collaborative Enhancement Project is led by Imperial College London (Dr Camille Kandiko Howson), working with the following partners: Bath Spa University, Liverpool John Moores University, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), The Open University, University of Birmingham, University of Cambridge, University of East Anglia, University of Exeter, University of Manchester, University of Plymouth, University of Portsmouth, University of Warwick.

<sup>2</sup> Office for Students (2022). Regulatory advice 22. Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023. [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-22-guidance-on-the-teaching-excellence-framework-2023/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-22-guidance-on-the-teaching-excellence-framework-2023/)



4. What educational gains they consider their students should achieve and the relative importance of each of these, what activities they are putting in place to enable students to make educational gains, and how they are supporting students to achieve them.

These findings are presented in the section on **Educational Gain Activities**.

5. What providers think can be measured, what measures they have available to them, how they are actually measuring gain, and the sorts of measurements they are using to do so.

These can be quite different. However, they are addressed together in one section (**Measuring Educational Gain**) as this shows up some of the inconsistencies and ambiguities of the providers' approaches.

6. What, if anything, they do with the data they collect and how they measure the effectiveness of their approach and assess the impact of the institution's efforts.

Although there is little evidence in the submissions for these two areas, they are described together in one section: **Evaluating Educational Gain**.

## Summary of analysis

In relation to the six areas, looking across the submissions, what might be expected is:

1. That a coherent definition of education gain is given.
2. That end-point success (educational gain) is aligned to the definition.
3. That the methodology for measuring 'gain' is articulated, aligned (to 1 and 2), is measurable, and is evaluated.
4. That any evidence of gain is connected to what has been said (1 and 2) and what has been measured (3).

In other words, that there would be a golden thread which runs through the whole submission. This is not the case for many, however.

The table below offers a broad summary of the findings. The darker the shading, the more providers have addressed this in their submissions. The arrows show where there is some level of alignment.

1. Who you are	2. What you do	3. Purpose of EG	4. Achieving EG	5. Data plan and data measures	6. Use of data & evaluation
Key institutional demographics	Your mission	Why are you doing this?	What are you going to achieve and how are you going to do it?	What can be measured (and what cannot) and at what point in student lifecycle	How and when will you know you have had impact?
<b>EVIDENCE</b>				Need start and end points	
↔		↔		↔	
Achievement of mission seen as an EG but not measurable. Some stop here, e.g. gain as 'access to HE'. Some focus on specific groups of students (but may then measure gains for all)	Unclear for whose benefit? Lack of differentiation of long-term goals and ambitions for students from measurable gains.	Domains of EG - either generic or specific. Much activity here, but often not measurable. Desires for disciplinary gains less apparent. Majority of activity 'in house'	Starting point data not always available. Much here, most not aligned to EGs. Use of existing measures more likely than creation of new. Often not SMART EGs, so hard to measure. Some plan forward, some collate backwards. A few good examples but not always aligned to gains (or all gains)	Only a few examples of how EG evidence is being used, by whom and where. Evaluation almost completely absent. Early days so perhaps not surprising.	

What is most apparent is that there is a lack of alignment across the six areas, and that most of the focus is on what successful educational gain looks like (largely gains in Knowledge, Work readiness, Skills, and Personal development) as well as the types of activities that the provider considers will enable students to make these gains. What happens to the data (other than supporting the TEF submission) and how their approach to educational gain might be developed are only lightly touched on by a small number of providers.

The issue with such a table, of course, is that it is linear, whereas approaches to educational gain are not, or at least have not been articulated that way by many providers. Indeed, significant work has been put in to developing the submissions, and a number of creative, non-linear approaches have been taken. It does mean, however, that some of the stages above have been overlooked, so it is difficult to have confidence that, across the sector, educational gains have been measured. Without this it remains challenging to evidence that gains have therefore been made.

Some of the more specific issues arising from the analysis are:

- There is a tendency for providers to define education goals but not necessarily educational gain – which requires some form of measurement. At times the contextualisation of approach towards, or purpose of, education gain, slips into providers presenting this as educational gain. In fact, they are goals, and are unlikely to be measurable.
- Linking educational gains to the institutional mission makes measurement a challenge. Offering information about the mission is helpful to contextualise the submission but there are only some aspects of an institution's mission which are likely measurable (such as social mobility). Greater comparability across institutional types would help contextualise gains across similar institutions.
- Most providers articulate a set of desired futures that they would like their students to achieve. Once again, however, not all of these are measurable, especially those that are very ambitious or will likely only be realised some considerable time post-graduation.
- The domains of educational gain largely align with knowledge, skills, work-readiness, and personal development; but having a 'good' student experience' is also mentioned. This is not an educational gain (although it may be an enabling factor).
- The ways in which educational gains will be achieved is a strong theme (stronger than that of how they will be measured).
- There is, in general, a lack of alignment between the definition of educational gain offered, the domains of educational gain articulated, and the actual evidence of educational gain. This is in part because measures are not always measurement of gain- between two points in time- although a number of HEIs do make this explicit. In addition, baseline measures are not always available to provide evidence of gain. As a result, many approaches indicate *change* but not measurement.
- Although a wide range of ways of measuring educational gains are presented, not all of these have the same 'weight' in relation to evidence although they are presented as having parity.
- A wide variety of evidence is offered across the submissions; however, whilst some of this is helpful in contextualising or positioning what providers are doing, it is not evidence of educational gain. This includes (largely) league table rankings and external examiner comments on a programme.
- Some of these issues have come about because providers have been able to 'cherry pick' what evidence they are using. So unlike data presented as part of the providers' Access and Participation Plan, for example, which needs to be extremely robust, for this exercise providers



were able to include whatever they wanted to, including weak or partial reporting of data, or metrics which do not offer evidence of students' educational gain.

## Making use of the report

To support the development of future submissions, alongside the schema, this report evidences a range of ways in which providers have framed their overall approaches to educational gain. It then explores in more detail how the providers have thought about different elements in their submissions, alongside examples of good practice. It is hoped that providers can learn from each other and that examples of good practice presented in the report can be adopted by others and scaled-up across the sector. A set of reflective questions is also presented at the end of each section which, it is hoped, will support institutions to learn from or build on the approaches taken by others.

Finally, an approach to using the schema, and a set of recommendations are presented. These draw in part from discussions held at the project partner conference in May 2024 so are included with thanks to those who participated.

# 1. Approaches to Educational Gain

## How have providers approached this?

Alongside the six elements identified in the introduction, there are four broad, conceptual approaches to educational gain identifiable in the submissions: students at the centre; beginning and endpoint considerations; lifecycle approaches; and ‘who we are and what we do’, or alignment to mission and values.

However, it is important to note that many providers have adopted elements from more than one approach, and some providers do not fall into any of these. For example, a small number of providers frame their conceptual approach around transformative learning or closing attainment gaps.

### **Approach One: Students at the centre**

In this approach the individual student is at the heart of a ‘system’ - of both development (intervention) and measurement – recognising that they have different starting points, which are then measured to evidence gain.

For example, the individual student *“and the barriers they face as predominately widening participation students or from groups under-represented in higher education”* underpins the theory of change model developed by South Devon College (GGG) which frames their whole approach, and Blackpool and The Fylde College (GGG) have developed a model which *“integrates a number of elements, with each individual student or apprentice at the centre”* (Blackpool and the Fylde College, GGG). The individual student is also at the centre of the models developed, respectively, by Manchester Metropolitan University (GGS) and Loughborough University (GGG) with Loughborough, for example, framing their approach around a development programme called ‘Personal Best’. The students at the centre approach is also taken by the University of York (GGS), stating that:

*The York Pedagogy inspires student engagement and progression via ambitious programme learning outcomes (PLOs). York PLOs are concise, stretching, future-focused and discipline-specific statements of the educational gain available to students in their programmes, informed by consultation with employers. They focus on what students will be able to do as a result of their learning. Consequently, all our students have clear statements of the disciplinary and transferable skills they will develop, highly relevant to their context and future ambitions - rather than a University-wide statement of educational gain or graduate attributes.*

### **Approach Two: Beginning and end point considerations**

Here, broadly, considerations of educational gain might be viewed as the overall outcome, and tend to be data-driven, using one or more overarching existing sets of metrics such as degree outcomes, employment outcomes or learning analytics. This approach may utilise the concept of ‘distance travelled’ (although this may also inform the other approaches). The University of Portsmouth (GGS), for example, describes the following in relation to evidence of success (of note they also adopt a lifecycle approach):

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS: Evaluating education gain requires review of distance travelled:  
→ Start point: The OfS has recently confirmed our classification as a low tariff provider and data from the OfS Size & Shape of Provision dashboard in section 1 shows the overall start point for our students including protected student characteristics.

→ End point: TEF metrics confirm that our students achieve outstanding levels of continuation and completion, particularly given the diversity of our intake on so many dimensions. Overall progression to employment metrics are excellent and improving.

Kingston University (GGG) uses 'Value Added (VA)' as their conceptualisation of Educational Gain, focused on the individual student and their journey and defined as:

*the distance travelled between the qualification with which a student entered our university, and the classification of their award when they graduate. Using data for all UK domiciled graduates over a three-year period, the VA metric gives the probability that any given student, with known entry tariff, will achieve a 1st or 2:1 in a given subject.*

Other providers also look to endpoints and track students over time but on a more modular basis. Norwich University of the Arts (GGG), for example, evidences educational gain in relation to students' marks, and the University of Bath (GGG) uses entry point tariffs and progression data to provide evidence of educational gain. Both these approaches are also aligned to the lifecycle approach described below.

Within this group the institutional focus might well be on a particular area of activity such as closing awarding gaps - as described by University College London (SSG):

*We can also look to UCL's extensive work to close the BAME awarding gap to consider whether we are delivering excellent outcomes for all and, while there are variations across programmes, UCL has been successful in reducing the gap across the university. To gain similar levels of insight across all five areas of impact we might also consider surveying alumni or other groups regularly to collate different perspectives, or we could look to our work on the new UCL Student Life Strategy to gain a deeper understanding of Social Impact for different student groups.*

This approach does not mean, however, that providers consider students as a singular group, with their needs or outcomes homogenised. Indeed, Kingston University (and other providers) are explicit about focusing on individual students and their educational gain.

### **Approach Three: Alignment to student lifecycle**

The third approach to educational gain focuses on elements of, or moments in, the student lifecycle. Those who use Approach One (students at the centre) and Approach Two (endpoint considerations) may also take a lifecycle approach. For example, while the University of Portsmouth (GGS) focus on endpoint considerations, they also use stages in the student lifecycle along the way:

*Evidence in this Submission demonstrates how we tailor our approach at each student lifecycle phase to ensure every student has the maximum opportunity for educational gain by improving both their subject knowledge and broader 'Hallmarks' i.e. soft-skills, personal skills and cultural competencies.*

However, there are providers that more explicitly map out gains and activities against specific points in the student lifecycle (such as access, continuation, or progression). This approach has been taken by the University of Huddersfield (GGG):

*These measures are integrated into the student journey from moving in, moving through to moving on and ultimately combine to provide an 'Educational Gain Index' that can be measured at university, subject, and course level to allow targeting of improvements as necessary. It can also provide a binary checklist for individual students with the transitioning and progression sections allowing for targeting interventions by PATs and other support staff.*

Aligning approaches to the student lifecycle is also a key element of number of other providers submissions, for example the Royal Veterinary College (SSG) state that:

*As part of the overall arc of support throughout the student lifecycle (induction; key transitions; graduation) we maintain and support our relationship with our alumni through RVC4Life. The 11,000+ worldwide members enjoy a lifelong link to RVC and often become ambassadors and representatives both at home and overseas.*

Of note, retention has gained little interest across the submissions - despite the link with attainment - and discussions of retention are curiously absent. So, while 98 per cent of providers explicitly talk about progression from HE, only five per cent refer to retention in any way.

In addition, just under ten per cent of providers talk about access and admissions in relation to educational gain. However, there is a difference between access data being used as the baseline for progress and access being seen as educational gain in its own right. A small number of providers suggest that facilitating access to higher education, including through the use of online programmes, is evidence of educational gain. It is not. It can, however, offer a useful starting point for measuring subsequent gains, as noted by Liverpool John Moores University (SSG):

*in 2021, the university was ranked highest in the Northwest for social mobility and was 4th out of all post-92 universities in England (Designing an English Social Mobility Index; HEPI, 2021, p.43). The Index used Access and Continuation data for students from IMD1 & 2, and LEO data to assess the 'social distance travelled by graduates, and the number of graduates transported.*

#### **Approach Four: Who we are and what we do**

For some providers educational gain aligns closely to their mission and values. Anglia Ruskin University (GGS), state that:

*Our approach to defining and evidencing educational gains is consonant with our mission of 'transforming lives through innovative, inclusive and entrepreneurial education and research', in the context of our diverse student body.*

Whilst for City, University of London (SBG):

*Our founding institutional mission to provide for 'the industrial skill, general knowledge, health and wellbeing of young men and women belonging to the poorer classes' succinctly encapsulates the three kinds of educational gain suggested by the OfS and its learning gain project as major areas of gain: work readiness; personal development; and academic gain. The intention to deliver on these is consistently articulated in our various strategies, policies, student- and public-facing documents.*

And Liverpool John Moores University (SSG) align their approach to both the beginning and endpoint considerations (student outcomes) and their institutional mission:

*Our approach to educational gain centres on providing students with authentic learning experiences that raise aspirations, contextualise skills and knowledge and support achievement relevant to students' future ambitions...This reflects our institutional mission, what students tell us that they want, and is supported by analysis of institutional (Student Outcomes) data.*

This mission-oriented approach is further explored in more detail in the sections on definitions and the purpose of education gain. None of these four approaches have more merit than the others; what makes them successful is the extent to which specific gains can be articulated and measured.

### How could these approaches be taken forward?

The following reflective questions might be helpful in thinking about the overall approach to educational gain. Some of these are covered in more detail in subsequent sections:

1. What conceptual approach frames your overall thinking about educational gain?
2. Does the approach to educational gain align with the definition of educational gain, how gain is expected to happen, and how it might be measured?
3. Can a 'golden thread' be pulled through the submission?
  - a. If not, where are the disconnects and why?
4. Can starting and end points, which can be used to evidence gain, be identified?
  - a. Do these 'two points in time' relate only to access and progression?
  - b. If not, what are the stopping off points? And what is the place of retention in any overall considerations?

## 2. Definitions of Educational Gain

### How have providers approached this?

All but two of the provider submissions analysed offer a clear definition of educational gain. However, they rarely explicate how these definitions have been developed. There are, however, a small number of examples. University College London (SSG) explain that they have:

*worked with the Students' Union to co-create a definition which can be personalised to individual students' ambitions. Our first step was to undertake a literature and data review. This synthesised some of the wider literature with several internal research projects that had gathered the views of students, alumni and employers. This gave us the foundations to develop a partnership project with the Students' Union to gather insights from current students. In November 2022, we co-delivered a series of six workshops for Student Reps and included some questions in a follow-up survey...*

And Loughborough University (GGG) state that:

*Through a joint focus group involving students from all disciplines, we sought to establish what academic, personal, work-related and 'other' development and skills matter to and are valued by students and what they feel they gain and should gain from their educational experience. This exercise has enabled us to capture the breadth and range of gains that are important to students.*

It may be that other providers have worked with their student body to do something similar. However, without evidence in the submissions this is unclear. Since student participation is fundamental to achieving educational gain, it would seem logical that they should be involved in the development of all aspects of educational gain. This may help to ensure that students understand from the outset why evidencing education gains is important to them, as well as what they need to do to attain and evidence gain.

Regardless of students' involvement, or not, across the submissions, there are four broad ways in which providers have thought about their definitions of educational gain (of note, some providers take both a bottom-up and a top-down approach).

1. 'Top-down', where the definition has been crafted by the provider (60%)	2. 'Top-down', where the provider has drawn on an external definition (e.g. Kandiko Howson, Rand, HEFCE/OFS) (14%)
3. 'Bottom-up' where the provider has built a definition drawing on either the evidence provided, or the outcomes intended (12%)	4. Aligning educational gain to graduate attributes (35%). Note: may also be integrated into the other approaches

Across the definitions, the providers not only evidence the approach taken (e.g. top-down/bottom-up) but also the elements that are included (broadly what educational gain encompasses, as well as its relationship to institutional mission, strategy or policy). In so doing, the providers have approached the crafting of definitions by, variously, including information on:

- WHAT domains of educational gain are the focus of activity.

- WHY they are approaching EG in the way they are, especially how it connects to their mission.
- WHAT FOR - what providers want students to achieve, both during their studies and post-graduation.
- HOW activities will enable students to achieve the expected gains.
- WHO – relates to those students who are the focus of activity.
- WHEN – refers to points in time when gain is made.

The table at the end of this section offers examples of how this has been done.

There are three broad categories of definitions:

1. Definitions that start with the context (and focus on WHAT, WHY, and WHAT FOR).
2. Definitions that focus on graduate ambitions (and include the HOW of educational gain).
3. Definitions that focus on particular groups of students (WHO).

No dominant definition of educational gain emerged from the provider submissions. Without this, providers can ‘get away with’ measuring just about anything, and it is no surprise that gains are frequently conflated with outcomes. Without any consistency of definition, there will be no consistency of what is measured or how it is measured. This makes it very challenging to look across the sector and be able to gauge how institutions are performing compared to each other.

Moreover, it is notable that WHEN gains might be achieved is largely not stated in the submissions – despite the fact that gains require change over time, or distance travelled, or some other form of ‘movement’. It is perhaps unsurprising then that a lack ability to evidence change is a weakness in many provider submissions (as described in the section on measurement).

If students are going to engage pursuing educational gains, then they need to have a clear and straightforward understanding of what educational gain means for them. Obviously, there is a tension between developing a definition which is too reductionist, and one that is too complex; or one that is so simplistic it is almost meaningless and one that is so multifaceted it cannot be properly understood. However, getting the definition ‘right’ is an essential first step.

### How could these approaches be taken forward?

Providers can develop their submission by working with students to help them think through the WHAT + WHY + WHAT FOR + HOW + WHO + WHEN of educational gain which can then help in the development of a workable definition.

The following reflective questions can support refining or further developing definitions of educational gain.

1. How are students engaging in the development of a definition? Are they also involved in other aspects of developing the approach to educational gain? If not, why not?
2. Should a top-down or bottom-up approach be taken?
  - a. If the definition is to be developed as a ‘bottom up’ approach, what happens if, in subsequent years, there is a desire to use different data?
3. What should be included in the definition?
  - a. If the definition is being crafted by the provider, what elements are of most importance to include?
  - b. Are the institutional mission, ethos, and values important in contextualising educational gain? How can these best be represented? Can these be measured in relation to educational gain?

Context-setting definitions	Graduate ambitions definitions	Student-focused definitions
<p>This group includes many of those who have adopted a top-down approach and include WHAT, WHY, and WHAT FOR, developing the context before addressing the approach. For around a third of all providers, the definition begins with an articulation of the mission and values of the provider (as a contextualisation for their approach) or is aligned to its educational mission, policy or strategy.</p> <p><i>Plymouth Marjon University (PMU) is a small, values-based university with a 180-year heritage of social justice and transformative education...This is the bedrock for our articulation of educational gain, which builds upon our values [WHY] to incorporate the specific mechanisms of change and academic skills critical for our mix of students and geographical context [WHAT]. (University of St Mark &amp; St John, GGS)</i></p> <p><i>We base our approach on our values of knowledge, wisdom, humanity, social responsibility and pioneering spirit...Our construction of educational gains is, therefore, both strategy and values-led [WHY]. It is highly personal – we intend our graduates to work with complexity, create prosperity, tackle social and environmental problems, and enhance their wellbeing through gaining confidence and happiness in who they are [WHAT FOR]. (The University of Manchester, SSG)</i></p>	<p>The ambitions institutions have for students is also strongly connected to the graduate attributes that are described by many, and which are specifically aligned to educational gain by around a fifth of providers. Perhaps because graduate attributes have been established for some time, these approaches often include HOW educational gain/graduate attributes will be attained.</p> <p><i>Our educational strategy has identified two different forms of educational gain. The first is the academic educational gain which is primarily secured and assessed through the courses in which students are enrolled [WHAT]. Our Graduate Attributes (Creative Problem Solving, Digital Competency, Enterprise, Questioning Mindset, Adaptability, Empathy, Collaboration, Resilience, and Self-awareness) are a key part of our Academic Framework and set clear expectations for the high-level capabilities that all our students are expected and supported to achieve. The way that these are developed and assessed is a key element in the validation for all our courses and articulated in the Programme Specification [HOW]. (Kingston University, GGG)</i></p>	<p>Finally, a very small number of providers offer a definition which encompasses, along with other elements, WHO - namely which students, or groups of students - are the focus of educational gain.</p> <p><i>Keele’s ethos remains true to its founding vision and mission: to provide a higher education experience that is accessible to all and enables all our students, regardless of background, to acquire the skills, knowledge and drive to make a genuine impact on the world. Our Vision and articulation of educational gain are one and the same [WHY]: we recruit students with potential from all backgrounds [WHO] and through a broad-based, research-informed educational experience, support them [HOW] to develop academically, professionally and personally [WHAT], and to graduate as socially and globally responsible citizens [WHAT FOR]. (University of Keele, GGS)</i></p>



### 3. The Purpose of Educational Gain

#### How have providers approached this?

Across the TEF submissions providers articulate the purpose of educational gain in three broad ways:

1. What providers want their students to *do* or to *have*.

University College London (SSG), for example, identifies a set of five 'UCL Futures' for their students: *Personal Impact; Academic Impact; Career Impact; Innovation & Enterprise Impact; Social Impact*.

2. What providers want their students to *become*, either during their studies or post-graduation.

This includes students who are 'critical thinkers', 'future employed' or 'socially mobile', or to have 'achieved their potential'. Examples include:

*Our vocation is to realise the potential of every single student, whatever their background, circumstances and starting point. (Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, GGG)*

*One of our central aims is to continue transforming lives by helping people to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Supporting students to succeed in their study, career and personal goals is a key element in achieving this aim. (The Open University, GSG)*

3. How the purpose of educational gain is aligned directly to the provider's mission and values.

*Our Model for Educational Gain, co-produced with our students, has our Values at its heart surrounded by key mechanisms of change (Reflective Practice & Metacognitive Ability: Mental Wellbeing: Self-Efficacy). (The University of St Mark & St John, GGS)*

*We base our approach on our values of knowledge, wisdom, humanity, social responsibility and pioneering spirit, which characterise our University, home city and region. (The University of Manchester, SSG)*

Of course, many providers think about the purpose of educational gain for their students in relation to all three. However, considerations about the purpose of educational gain then directly shape providers broader thinking – about what to prioritise or focus on, or who should be the key beneficiaries of any intended gain. For example, one approach is for providers to place one aspect of educational gain at the heart of their submission. This approach has been adopted by City College Plymouth (GGG) who have 'Skills Development Initiatives' at the centre of their overall approach:

*The College has developed a model for Educational Gain which focuses specifically on the development of skills, but within the context of understanding the barriers our students may face due to their potential characteristics of disadvantage, including a lack of HE background in their family and home environment, financial concerns (particularly related to digital poverty) and the complex balance of responsibilities many of our students face as caregivers.*

A further way that providers have approached this is to align aspects of educational gain to the goals they have for their students, such as this example from Imperial:

*At Imperial, we aim to equip our students with the knowledge, skills and behaviours which they will need to become leaders in their chosen fields in industry, business and academia. For*

*many, this will be in professions that don't yet exist, addressing global challenges that we don't yet fully understand or even recognise. (Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, GSG)*

A third approach is where providers have indicated the students WHO<sup>5</sup> are the particular focus of such activities. Students with disabilities, care leaver students, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, and students with caring responsibilities are identified across a number of submissions, particularly in relation to overcoming barriers and disadvantage. Linked to this, a number of institutions, for example Solent University (GGG) and Kingston University (GGG), have aligned, at least in part, educational gain with the elimination of awarding gaps. This may be because the requirement for providers to develop Access and Participation Plans which address awarding gaps at the institutional level means that thinking has already gone into this and, more importantly, the data to make claims (or not) about progress already exists.

The final approach taken by providers is to target interventions in a more holistic way, again aligned to one or more of the goals of educational gain:

*A new targeted impactful intervention, designed to build the confidence of all students once they have arrived at Solent, expands and embeds a 2022/23 pilot partnership with GRIT. GRIT is a charity which specialises in intensive personal development and coaching programmes designed to transform (limiting) beliefs students hold about themselves, their peers and their educational community. (Solent University, GGG)*

One of the strongest themes across the submissions is that approaches are dominated by providers' roles in preparing students for 'the future'. While this is undoubtedly a clear goal of higher education, the ability to think into the future is a disposition that is unevenly shared: male, middle-class, or wealthier students are more likely to be oriented to the future than female students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or other social groups<sup>6</sup>. For this reason, attention needs to be given to avoid assumptions that all students are able to plan and prepare for the future. Although many providers are mindful of this and address it in their discussions of personal development, or more broadly, (see the example of Solent University noted above), this is more common in post-92 institutions.

This future-orientation means that it is no surprise then that a further way in which the providers think about the purpose of educational gain is in relation to what they want to *enhance, address or build* in, or for, the future. The table at the end of this section presents three areas that providers articulate as being the purpose of educational gain: to enhance students' outcomes; to address global challenges; and to build students' societal contributions.

It is worth noting, however, that - at times - the 'desired futures' providers have for their students appear to focus more on the benefits educational gains might have for the provider. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but this raises questions about the broader purpose of measuring educational gain. Moreover, the focus of the submissions is significantly more about future success than about developing students to be successful 'in the present'.

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<sup>5</sup> Also see section on definitions.

<sup>6</sup> See for example [Possible selves: students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity: British Educational Research Journal: Vol 37, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#); or [Possible Selves and Higher Education: New Interdisciplinary Insights - \(routledge.com\)](#)

Finally, while providers have high aspirations for their students, educational gain needs to be measurable and to evidence 'distance travelled' or change over time. It is difficult to imagine how this might be achieved for some ambitions. This is because there is a difference between having educational goals and being able to measure educational gains. At times educational goals are described by providers as desired educational gains. However, whilst goals can be aspirational, gains need to be measurable.

### How could these approaches be taken forward?

Providers can start by thinking about the vision they have for their students and how this aligns to educational goals:

1. What does the institution hope, believe and expect that students should become, or should achieve?
  - a. What do they want to enhance, address, or build through the attainment of these goals?
  - b. Are these all 'future oriented' or are some of these aligned to students' time in higher education?
2. Is it possible for a SMART objective (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) to be developed for each of these?
  - a. Or are they more educational ambitions? If so, make a clear distinction between educational ambitions and measurable educational gains.
3. Can the purpose of educational gain be aligned back to the mission and forward to the specific gains that the provider hopes students to achieve? Or is there a disconnect?
  - a. If there is a disconnect, why is there? (Most likely because it is not possible to measure a 'goal' in which case it is probably an ambition.)

## How providers articulate the purpose of educational gain

<b>ENHANCE</b> <b>Students' outcomes</b>	<b>ADDRESS</b> <b>Global challenges</b>	<b>BUILD</b> <b>Students' societal contributions</b>
<p><b>Be skilled (generically or specifically): 14%</b><sup>7</sup> <i>At the forefront of music education globally...our graduates will also be highly skilled creative practitioners, with a genuine passion and commitment to make a difference (Royal Northern College of Music, GGG)</i></p>	<p><b>Enable and facilitate social justice: 14%</b> <i>Like other HE providers, B&amp;FC seeks to understand which educational activities create the maximum impact on 'supporting social justice, sustainability and social cohesion and challenging intergenerational poverty' (Blackpool and the Fylde College, GGG)</i></p>	<p><b>Have an impact on society/the world/ their discipline: 25%</b> <i>Sustained support for student learning...so that our students are well prepared to make a significant impact on professional musical life as practitioners, leaders and influencers after progression (Royal Academy of Music, GGG)</i></p>
<p><b>Achieve their 'full potential': 11%</b> <i>To enable all students to achieve to their full potential and to progress to managerial or professional employment, or further study, students need to develop a range of academic, personal and employability skills to support their ambitions (Weston College of Further and Higher Education, GGS)</i></p>	<p><b>Tackle inequalities, including enhancing racial justice: 14%</b> <i>...the development of multi- and inter-cultural awareness, education for sustainable development, and a commitment toward social justice and tackling inequalities (University of Liverpool, GSG)</i></p>	<p><b>Be socially and globally responsible: 20%</b> <i>...designed to promote students' social and personal growth: deepening their understanding of local, national, and global challenges and solutions. Reflecting our commitments to social responsibility and social justice we also prepare our students to be active agents of social transformation (Solent University, GGG)</i></p>
<p><b>Be employed post-graduation, including in well paid careers: 10%</b> <i>...their salary expectations are higher than the national average; and their most important career factors (and at a higher rate than the national average) are good career prospects and interesting work. Our educational gain definition reflects our students' ambitions, and our core education equips those who wish to undertake further study for their future careers (The University of Bath, GGG)</i></p>	<p><b>Address climate change: 6%</b> <i>We aim to enable all students to see the challenges associated with the climate emergency, inequality and social injustice in their fields of study; promote the application of critical thinking skills in learning, with an aim to address societal challenges and foster collaboration (University of Exeter, GGG)</i></p>	<p><b>Develop cultural understanding and cross-cultural awareness: 25%</b> <i>...educational gain is co-designed to stretch students' intellectual, personal, and cultural learning through learning beyond the boundaries of their discipline, the taught context, and cultural or national contexts, to enhance their agency for life during and after their studies (University of Warwick, GGG)</i></p>
<p><b>Be socially mobile: 14%</b> <i>Because our focus on outcome goes beyond helping students develop specific skills, our graduates are life-ready, not simply 'work-ready'. We build their confidence, develop their career aspirations and support their social mobility (University of Greenwich, GGS)</i></p>		

<sup>7</sup> Percentage of providers who mentioned these.

## 4. Educational Gain Activities

### How have providers approached this?

Providers largely focus on the domains of educational gain (WHAT<sup>8</sup>) as being one or more of knowledge, work readiness, skills, and personal development (although other language may be used). Broader enabling factors have also been identified. Many providers linked across several domains in their definitions of educational gain:

*At Norland, we define Educational Gain as the advantages gained by our students in studying for the Norland degree and diploma, in terms of their skills, knowledge and career prospects. (Norland College Limited, GGG)*

*The change in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development, as well as enhancement of specific practices and outcomes in defined disciplinary and institutional contexts. (Blackpool and the Fylde College, GGG)*

The percentages of providers who explicitly mention each of these four domains is noted in the table at the end of this section. The description of activities with the potential to enable educational gains for students is probably the most straightforward and uncontroversial element of the submissions (how these activities are used to evidence gain is more problematic, as described in the section on Measurement). The providers showcase a range of activities that broadly aligned with the four domains of educational gain, however, many activities cut across more than one domain.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Work readiness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employability skills development (CV writing; interview skills)</li> <li>• Career development (internships; placements; industry experience etc.)</li> <li>• Engagement with employers and industry experts</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Skills development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic skills development; tutorial support</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial skills development</li> <li>• Specialist skills development activities (especially in specialist providers)</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Knowledge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive teaching and assessment</li> <li>• Disciplinary/interdisciplinary knowledge</li> <li>• Professional knowledge activities (especially in specialist providers)</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Personal development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extra-curricular activities (including in sport); co-curricular activities</li> <li>• Soft skills development (confidence building, teamwork)</li> <li>• Inclusive activities; developing a sense of belonging</li> </ul>

1. **Work readiness.** This is, jointly the most mentioned element of educational gain, referred to by 98 per cent of providers in their submissions. The role of alumni and employers were key to offering industry insights, internships and placements:

<sup>8</sup> See the section on definitions.

*Bringing [these] alumni back to the University, whether in physical or virtual format, allows students to broaden their horizons and build valuable connections. Students are supported to connect with alumni via the Alumni Careers Connect platform and networking events. (University of Cambridge, GGG)*

*Through delivering 'employer on campus' events and developing impactful mentoring opportunities, we proactively activate Teesside's collective professional networks and unlock associated opportunities for the benefit of our students. (Teesside University, GGG)*

- 2. Skills development.** Skills development was referred to by 98 per cent of providers. Teaching, learning and assessment activities feature strongly in the submissions, linked to the development of skills, including soft skills, and to work readiness.

Academic skills development activities were referred to by around two thirds of the providers and cover activities such as the development of academic writing ("*Academic writing, referencing skills, written and verbal communication skills, including effective presentation skills*" *Weston College of Further and Higher Education, GGS*), but also broader 'soft' skills such as critical thinking or problem solving ("*critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, ethical practice and effective approaches to communication*", *Manchester Metropolitan University, GGS*). This can be embedded in programmes or offered as co-curricular activity:

*Academic skills are also supported centrally, through our strong support for academic development via GreFest, LevelUp and our VLE courses. This work further develops life competencies, such as numeracy, literacy, time management and the ability to continue to learn and grow as a professional. (University of Greenwich, GGS)*

- 3. Personal development.** The third area of activity, described by 95 per cent of providers, as offering opportunities for education gain relates to the personal development that may be engendered through participation in extra and co-curricular activities. These are regarded as offering opportunities to develop soft skills (such as teamwork, problem-solving and communication skills) but also to the development of confidence and resilience:

*In addition to our core curricular programme, the College offers students a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to enhance their learning, develop cross-disciplinary awareness, and develop their self-efficacy and personal and professional identity. (Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, GSG)*

*We view educational gains as emerging from the intersection between curricular and co-curricular opportunities that allows the knowledge and skills developed in the classroom to be practiced, honed and applied in real-life scenarios, whether that be developing an award-winning science publication, choreographing a charity Diwali Show or carrying out pro bono work for local community organisations. (King's College London, SSG)*

Volunteering activities feature across around 10 per cent of providers, and perhaps unsurprisingly participation in sport as a vehicle for educational gain features strongly in the more sports-oriented institutions and are valued as opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills.

*The Coach and Volunteer Academy (CVA) provides students with high quality sport-based coaching, volunteering and leadership opportunities...In 2021/22, the CVA facilitated ~62,000 hours of volunteering, >100 masterclasses and workshops, and trained 173 volunteers in first aid, with 637 students logging volunteering hours. (Loughborough University, GGG)*

Overall, the submissions showcase an extensive range and breadth of extra- and co-curricular activities, with many providers encouraging students to evidence participation through institutional award schemes:

*Third year students can also engage with The York Award. This provides recognition of personal and professional development, such as experiences of teamwork and leadership in programmes, our Colleges, student societies and volunteering. Participating in the York Award helps students articulate the positive characteristics they have to offer. (University of York, GGS)*

4. **Knowledge.** It is notable that 'knowledge' is the least mentioned of the domains – by only 80 per cent of providers (although some providers implicitly refer to this in relation to what students will 'learn'), as are disciplinary skills in relation to the broader domain of 'skills'. It is also notable that some providers cite the development of subject knowledge as an educational gain domain, but then offer little evidence of the activities that will lead to gain. Knowledge development is, however, more likely to be described by specialist providers or in relation to particular programmes within an institution:

*Students benefit from the development of a range of relevant skills and subject knowledge in a specific professional context, which means they are gaining the ability to diagnose and treat the full range of symptoms and dysfunction that osteopaths may encounter. (University College of Osteopathy, SSG)*

*Using the Design, Implement, Operate problem-based learning approach, our Mechanical Engineering and Design Engineering students work in diverse groups on the whole life-cycle of a design project in workspaces and laboratories that support the learning of product, process, and system, building skills concurrently with disciplinary knowledge. (Aston University, GGG)*

The specialist providers are also significantly more likely to identify disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary skills as being important educational gains. This may be because the non-specialist institutions would need to refer to multiple disciplines in their discussion of how such gains have been achieved. However, some of the specialist providers are also diverse and have addressed this in their submissions.

**Enabling environments.** While not activities themselves, these describe environments and approaches which will support students to make educational gains. Inclusive pedagogies, including inclusive assessment practices, are strong themes across the submissions, with around a fifth of providers making this explicit and, as with other areas, linking this not only to teaching and learning but also to the employability skills and work readiness:

*Another factor where accredited outcomes educational gains (both knowledge and skills) and professional employability factors coincide stems from the inclusive ethos of the course curriculum and the enhancement curriculum. This inclusive ethos...is written into the course achievement criteria adding a dimension of weight and currency to the profile of students entering the performing arts/theatre/creative arts world. (Chickenshed Theatre Trust, GSG)*

*We are clear that our focus on creating an inclusive, applied curriculum, strategically imprinted with industry opportunities (e.g. through placements, internships, industry-linked assessment) offers a fantastic catalyst to contextualise learning to the very real demands of the sectors we serve and achieve the desired educational gains. (Hartpury University, GGG)*



These activities are also, for some providers, explicitly designed to reduce awarding gaps.

Ensuring authentic learning and assessment was also a strong theme across the submissions with almost a quarter of providers describing their commitment to enabling educational gain through the delivery of authentic learning and assessment activities:

*Our approach to educational gain centres on providing students with authentic learning experiences that raise aspirations, contextualise skills and knowledge and support achievement relevant to students' future ambitions This is now embedded in our institutional Learning and Teaching implementation plans. (Liverpool John Moores' University, SSG)*

The role of academic staff in offering research-led, authentic, inclusive teaching and assessment practices was highlighted by several providers, noting that these are supported by staff development opportunities:

*The Pedagogy Social Enterprise Model developed as an output of the research outlines the necessary skills and capabilities that should be embedded within curriculum delivery. These have been mapped into our Educational Gain model, and we are committed to embedding this framework explicitly within all of our HE courses, through a programme of staff development and course redesign over the next two years. (City College Plymouth, GGG)*

The role of professional services and support staff, ensuring student well-being, offering mental health support and/or counselling; delivering academic support; and careers/employability support was also frequently mentioned across the submissions:

*Students have different starting points; therefore, we work with specific student populations and those with particular characteristics to ensure we provide interventions and support that are accessible to all students (see SE5). Sometimes that involves fostering confidence so everyone can access the same support; in other cases, it is tailored. (University of Manchester, SSG)*

There is one area of concern, however: across many of the provider submissions graduate attributes are aligned to educational gains; however, for others they are not. In these circumstances, students may be in the unenviable position of participating in one set of activities to evidence educational gains AND then in a different set to achieve desired graduate attributes. These two requirements need to be integrated so that educational gains become part of the articulation of graduate attributes.

### How could these approaches be taken forward?

The reflective questions below can help evolve thinking in relation to domains of educational gain:

1. What are the aspects of educational gain which are of most importance to the provider? Have these been articulated in the definition?
  - a. Do all of the domains have equal weight or are some more important?
  - b. Is there a particular way in which these should be described that matches the provider and their activities?
2. What is the place of disciplinary knowledge or disciplinary skills for students and how are these articulated?
3. Are the domains of educational gain aligned to the goals identified for students, and/or the provider?
  - a. If there is a disconnect, why is this?
4. What domains of educational gain are considered to be of most value to students?
  - a. How has this been determined and what might account for this?



- b. Can students select the domains of educational gain of most relevance and importance to them?
- 5. Have educational goals and graduate attributes been aligned and is the process for evidencing achievement integrated?
- 6. Which groups of students are the beneficiaries of any specific types of educational gain, or will activities be inclusive of all students? What are the implications for measuring gain if either approach is taken?
- 7. Do all students have equitable access to the range of opportunities provided?
  - a. If not, which students are more likely to be excluded and why (timing, cost)?
  - b. What remediating action can be put in place to ensure they are not disadvantaged?
- 8. Where is learning gain taking place? (curricular, co-curricular, extra-curricular)
  - a. Is there a balance so that the responsibility is not wholly on students to make their educational gains outside of the curriculum?
  - b. Can educational gains be largely embedded within the curriculum? Is there a reason why they are not?
- 9. Is there an unambiguous divide between evidence of an activity and evidence of education gain? (for example, a student who gains an internal award may, or may not, have made educational gains)

Domains of Activity	Examples
<p><b>Work readiness: 98%</b> This includes preparation for employment including career development and post-graduate employment</p>	<p><i>In Careers and Employability, students are introduced to the concept of learning gain through their use of the Profile Digital employability resource. Like other Profile resources, the digital platform aesthetic appeals to creative visual learners, making use of symbols and gifs as engagement tools, and using language that is creative industry appropriate. (Norwich University of the Arts, GGG)</i></p> <p><i>From the start of the course students are taught to identify and reflect on their personal, professional and career development goals and needs so that they graduate feeling prepared and equipped to be lifelong learners within the field of osteopathy. (University College of Osteopathy, SSG)</i></p> <p><i>We have developed a Career Readiness Programme...using the concepts Explore, Develop and Apply, students are supported to evaluate their preparedness, identify their next steps and access a range of specifically created resources to support their development. (University of Lincoln, GGG)</i></p>
<p><b>Skills: 98%</b> This includes general skills (for example the development of academic skills) and more specific skills such as those developed in the specialist providers</p>	<p><i>The College focuses on the development of skills as the essential feature of educational gain above and beyond the student's achievement of their qualification. (City College Plymouth, GGG)</i></p> <p><i>Future Skills is a progressive model of education that aims to prepare graduates for the challenges of life and work in the twenty-first century through equipping them with the higher cognitive skills to be independent learners. (Kingston University, GGG)</i></p> <p><i>It is of key importance that our students and graduates can create their own opportunities for success, in the ways they personally define success...Our Graduate Characteristics provide the skill set our graduates need to achieve this success and represent our vision of our students' educational gains. (University of Northumbria at Newcastle, SSG)</i></p>
<p><b>Knowledge: 80%</b> This includes academic knowledge per se, as well as how this supports retention, progression and attainment</p>	<p><i>Students are evidently furthering their knowledge of fashion design and its relation to fashion history and theory through the extended essay. Students gain a holistic view of fashion design, how it relates to the retail environment and market awareness. (Morley College Ltd, GGS)</i></p> <p><i>All our programmes of study are designed to enable students to gain knowledge of and experience in problem solving, quantitative reasoning, critical reading and evaluation, disciplinary cognitive gain, critical reasoning skills, situational judgement, and research methods. (University of Chichester, GGS)</i></p> <p><i>...to equip graduates with a broad range of critical, analytical and comparative skills necessary to be adaptive and versatile thinkers in a contemporary world that is dynamic and evolving. (Spurgeon's College, GGG)</i></p>
<p><b>Personal development: 95%</b> This includes areas such as realising potential, personal growth; overcoming barriers to attainment, progression or post-graduate employment; enabling equitable participation in extra- and co-curricular activities</p>	<p><i>The School's creative curriculum ... includes enrichment of the student experience to provide tailored opportunities for personal journey development, enhancing the learning experience to contextualise the wider purpose of creative practice, and meeting, stretching, and challenging individual aspirations. (Northern School of Art, GGS)</i></p> <p><i>We support our students to achieve their potential in becoming global citizens through new initiatives to help increase confidence, share experiences and develop personal skills and attributes. (Teesside University, GGG)</i></p> <p><i>Our education brings gains through being holistic, not only through intellectual stretch and authentic learning, but also through focusing on the personal and social development of our students. (University of Bristol, SSG)</i></p>

## 5. Measuring Educational Gain

### How have providers approached this?

It is unsurprising that, considering the different educational gains providers anticipate, and the numerous activities deemed to contribute to the attainment of these, that measuring gain is complex and multifaceted. This becomes even more of a challenge when providers consider gains at an individual and collective level, and at multiple different stages in the student lifecycle.

This complexity is reflected in the evidence provided by institutions, presented below in broad order of how frequently providers refer to these including: externally validated metrics, students' self-reporting, rankings, student participation in activities, reports from stakeholders and student feedback.

Of note, the way of measuring and the *outcome* of the measurement are often used interchangeably – for example a provider might note 'we use the Graduate Outcomes Survey to provide evidence of gain' without articulating what the gain is. Or providers may use an institutional-level award, such as a Guardian Award, as evidence of gain. This is common across submissions.

**Externally validated metrics.** This includes Access and Participation Plan targets and outcomes; Graduate Outcomes data; benchmarking against other providers; and the English Social Mobility Index ranking. These approaches are adopted, in some way, by all providers, with many using multiple metrics, and where possible, combining them:

*The impact of UoN educational gains is evidenced through our graduate outcomes. These are at benchmark within a high-achieving benchmark group, and materially above benchmark for groups of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education...[in addition] We have created our own 'added value' indicator for progression by using the ratio of TEF data to the entry tariff data from the Guardian University Guide 2023. (University of Nottingham SSG)*

*The College analyses student outcome metrics (continuation, completion and progression) at Department and programme level. This analysis includes examining the differences in these measures for students in different demographics ('split metrics'). This data is available to departments through our Differential Outcomes Dashboard. (Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, GSG)*

**Student self-reporting.** Student self-reflection, self-reporting through surveys (including data from the National Student Survey [NSS], module reviews, internal student surveys) and the development of reflective portfolios, both curricular or extra-curricular, are used by many of the providers.

In relation to curricular-based self-reflection, this was particularly noticeable in the arts-based and other specialist providers, for example at Harper Adams University (GSG) where, "*within programmes of study, students continually assess their own learning and have space to personalise aspects of their education to meet specific needs; students track their own progress toward professional competencies*"; and The Arts Educational Schools (GGG) where "*all students keep personal journals and logbooks throughout their projects and productions requiring ongoing self-reflection on strengths, development needs and progress in achieving any improvements needed*".

Other providers support the development of student self-reflection as they build their employability skills through additional activities, such as at the University of Keele (GGS) which offers a set of resources, including:

*self-assessment tools on personal attributes, such as strengths, learning styles, resilience, motivation, decision making and resources including a CV builder, employer videos, assessment centre tools, aptitude builder, and an elevator pitch builder. This highly structured*

*framework for personal and careers-focussed development provides an intuitive and accessible means for students to identify and work through the support available at their stage in development.*

Finally, some providers offer a combination of the two approaches, such as Loughborough University's (GGG) Personal Best student development programme which *"involves flexible, blended and scaffolded delivery (online, in person, curricular and extracurricular) of a range of skills, behaviours and opportunities for students"* with successful completion resulting in an award.

**Rankings:** are prevalent across the submissions, including QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education Rankings. However, whilst these are evidence of institutional-level achievements, they are not evidence of students' education gain. Citing other indicators of success such as external awards (Student Social Mobility Awards; Guardian Awards); internal awards – gained by programmes or by students; or Guardian University Guide comments were also common across the submissions. Again, however, whilst they show that providers have gained recognition, they are not evidence of gain.

**Student participation.** Offering evidence of student engagement (e.g., with careers guidance activities) and involvement (e.g., in extra-curricular activities) are also not evidence of gain. They may, however, provide information which allows providers to make informed decisions about where to prioritise interventions. It is how students make gains from their participation and engagement which can provide evidence of educational gain.

**Reports from stakeholders:** such as employers, external examiners, alumni, higher education consultants and QAA feedback were commonly used as apparent evidence of gain. Again, these may offer contextual information and highlight the sorts of activities being undertaken and the feedback given; they may also be indicators of quality. But that is not the same as evidencing gain.

**Student feedback.** Many providers have included comments from students in their submission; some of these are individual quotes from students or alumni; other examples come from qualitative comments in the NSS or other feedback mechanisms. It is important that the 'student voice' is captured in the submissions but using a quote from a single student is only evidence of gain for that one student.

### Critique of measures used

Across the submissions a number of issues stand out. As the 2015 [Rand report](#) notes, for considerations of validity and comparability there are three broad measurement levels: those that are objective and externally validated (strongest); those that are objective and internally validated; those that are subjective and internally validated (weakest). However, across many of the submissions these are all given similar 'weight'.

The evidence presented across the submissions can be categorised in the following way:

Measurement level	Examples of evidence
Objective and externally validated	APP targets and outcomes Graduate Outcomes data English Social Mobility Index ranking
Objective and internally validated	Module grades Module evaluations Standardised tests
Subjective and internally validated	Students' reflective portfolios NSS qualitative comments Non-standardised tests

There are further considerations which need to be highlighted:

- **'Evidence' which is not actually evidence:** many providers make claims about gain being achieved through admissions or access to higher education; however, these may be institutional activities, but they are not evidence of gain (although they could be used as a baseline). In addition, inclusive assessment or teaching practices are enablers, but by themselves do not evidence gain.
- **Lack of evidence of gain:** providers evidence a lot of activity but not necessarily the resultant gain. This is in part because many providers do not have access to, or are choosing not to use, baseline indicators so evidence gain is problematic. It may also be because some providers remain uncertain about what actually counts as gain. In addition, the measure of an activity is often used as a proxy for a presumed gain.
- **Weak data:** a lot of the gain relating to personal growth is not well measured, probably because there are fewer quantitative metrics available. Qualitative approaches used include self-assessment and case studies. These can be helpful for contextualisation but care needs to be taken when talking about these as evidence of gain.
- **Mixing and matching:** many providers mix and match their measurements (individual gains, cohort gaps, institutional gains/achievement). This not only creates complexity but makes it difficult to clarify what actual gain has been made for an individual or their cohort.
- **Inconsistency of approaches:** many providers are using measures and gains synonymously and reporting measures (such as good student outcomes) as examples of gain *per se*. This would only be the case if, for example, students were shown to have exceeded what outcome they might have been predicted to have achieved.
- **Variability of reporting:** across the submissions, providers note a wide range of ways of approaches to measuring educational gains: metrics, rankings, self-reflection, student engagement and participation etc. However, these are being reported on variably, and there is no consistent approach to what is presented or how it is done.
- **Selectivity:** many (but not all) providers only report what is positive, and 'cherry pick' what to present such as 'positive comments' from the NSS, or a position on only certain league tables. All data should be reported, or none, for key metrics.
- **A lack of alignment:** in some provider submissions there is significant slippage between what they consider educational gain to be, what they say they are measuring, and then what they ultimately present as evidence.

There are, however, examples where providers are able to evidence alignment and pull the 'golden threads' through the whole submission, as evidenced by the University of Plymouth (GGG):

*The progress of a student from entry to the University through to professional career or further study can be considered a measure of educational gains. This 'distance travelled' is particularly important for us and we have therefore attempted to define a quantitative measure of educational gains, in support of the above qualitative data, also allowing comparison across the sector. We have used entry tariff as a suitable proxy for entry to University as it reflects both prior educational attainment and likely educational deficit (lack of privilege etc). Entry qualifications for graduating 2019/20 FT UG UK domiciled first degree students were determined from HEIDI data to enable sector comparison, measured against the 2019/20 GO survey data as a summary of the level of educational gains achieved. The latest GO sector data were used to track FT UG students throughout the TEF period, the majority commencing a three-year degree in 2017/18, as an experimental metric. Sector data looked at HEI providers within the GO survey results and excluded the Open University. We recognise this metric will have caveats and ideally GO data would be directly linked with entry tariff at student level for the sector.*

### How could these approaches be taken forward?

The following reflective questions can be helpful in thinking about measuring educational gain:

1. Will the approach to measuring educational gain use new data, or re-analyse existing data?
  - a. Have a set of SMART objectives been crafted?
  - b. When are the two points in time, or the 'distances' between which gain will be measured?
  - c. When will measurements be taken? Why has this timescale been adopted?
2. How will each dimension of educational gain be measured?
  - a. Are some being measured more robustly than others? If so, why is this?
  - b. Is evidence being proposed actual evidence of gain or of 'quality'?
3. Will the approach(es) be qualitative or quantitative or both?
  - a. If qualitative, is too much weight being given to the evidence being proposed (such as External Examiner comments)?
  - b. If quantitative, are validated tools being used?
4. Who is responsible for measuring gain?
  - a. Have they been offered guidance and support to do so?
5. What role does student self-reflection play?
  - a. What self-reflection activities are being supported? (this is particularly important for students, especially those who may find reflection challenging)
6. Are approaches to developing and measuring educational gain embedded in the curriculum?
  - a. If not, should they be? And how can they be?
  - b. How can this align with students' developing and evidencing graduate attributes?
7. Is there alignment across the whole mapping of the education gain submission? Here the schema may be useful.

## 6. Using Data and Evaluating Educational Gain

### How have providers approached this?

Across the submissions a number of providers intend to develop action plans, and/or monitor and review their approach to educational gain. However only a small number explicitly state how they will evaluate their approach rather than simply monitor it.

Solent University (GGG) offers a comprehensive methodology for evaluation, drawing on their Evaluation Checklist and four stages of impact evaluation approach, developed for their APP work. Using this they are:

*confident that by using this established approach, our EG evaluation activities will meet the expectations of both Type 1 evaluations (Narrative) and Type 2 evaluations (Empirical Enquiry) and where the interventions allow, Type 3 (Causality). Wherever possible we will also use and improve existing processes to gather evidence of achievement and success.*

Other providers are using Theory of Change approaches (drawing on work many have already done for their AAPs or other activities within their institution). For example, the University of Plymouth's (GGG) approach "is supported by a theory of change, based on guidance from the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)" whilst City College Plymouth (GGG) describe how:

*Building on the theory of change models developed as part of our Access and Participation Plan, the College has developed a model for Educational Gain which focuses specifically on the development of skills, but within the context of understanding the barriers our students may face due to their potential characteristics of disadvantage, including a lack of HE background in their family and home environment, financial concerns (particularly related to digital poverty) and the complex balance of responsibilities many of our students face as caregivers.*

However, it remains notable that across the submissions, evaluation has not yet been fully (or even partially) thought through for many providers. A larger number of providers indicate in their submissions how they will develop their approaches in the future. For example, the London School of Economics and Political Science (SSG) note that all of their institutional change programmes will, from now on:

*develop Theories of Change that clearly identify intended impacts and underlying mechanisms of change. Where relevant, this will include clarifying contributions to students' educational gain...so that we can clearly demonstrate the impact of activities on students' educational gain and improve activities that do not yet deliver it.*

A few providers describe how they will engage further with data to help enhance their approaches. For example, Blackpool and the Fylde College (GGG) offer a detailed and comprehensive account of how they will continue to use data 'to enhance proactive interventions', including using Power BI dashboards and the use of Big Data learning analytics. They go on to say that:

*Our future view of educational gains will be aided by machine learning and artificial intelligence, and – rather than a discrete area of practice – this data will be inserted into business-as-usual to unlock better student-centred decision making and allow enriching evidence-based learning conversations with our students.*

The use of data is also driving the future plans of Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (GSG), who will "show the data in dashboards to both staff and students, allowing them to be active agents in their own learning". Others will be extending their use of data to create a more



disaggregated understanding of educational gain for all students. For example, University College London (SSG) will use data to gain “*a more intersectional picture across all five areas will help us to ensure that we are delivering outstanding Educational Gains for all our students.*”; whilst the University of Exeter (GGG) will use data to:

*facilitate focused student support including interventions to close attainment and awarding gaps; and the development of analytics to support the whole student journey, academically and pastorally. A new Data Strategy is currently under development as a result of this work and will equip us to efficiently and effectively capture all our students’ educational gains over time.*

A further group of providers, for example the University of Warwick (GGG) and the University College of Osteopathy (SSG) note that they will be undergoing curriculum reviews and will take the opportunity to further embed and integrate educational gain into the curriculum.

The final group of providers include those who are developing new ways for students to achieve, or record their educational gains, on a relatively small-scale, such as adding new questions to the NSS survey, or developing new questionnaires to measure gain or more wide-ranging – for example the University of Cambridge (GGG) who is “*developing an undergraduate skills framework to supplement academic course study and supervisions at the University, and the knowledge developed directly through these*”.

There are, however, only a few clear indicators in the submissions that consideration of educational gain has, as yet become part of the ‘DNA’ of institutions, discussed and agreed through various institutional committees. There are exceptions of course, for example Kingston University (GGG):

*Value Added provides a powerful tool to allow us to identify and monitor the relative rates of educational gain. Through our Data Insight Dashboards we make Value Added data available to all staff, and Course Leaders are required to analyse their Course level data, report differential rates of Value Added and identify actions to address this, as part of the Course Annual Monitoring and Enhancement Process.*

However, whilst the TEF submission or APPs might be subject to institutional scrutinization, educational gain has perhaps yet to gain the same sort of visibility. In addition, since the delivery of educational gain largely takes place at the ‘grass-roots’ level, discussions around educational gain also need to take place at a local level.

### How could these approaches be taken forward?

The following reflective questions might be helpful in thinking about the overall approach to educational gain:

1. How will the delivery of educational gain be monitored?
  - a. Has an action plan been developed to support any requisite or desired change?
2. What are the future plans for educational gain and who gets to decide these and how?
3. Has an approach to evaluation been developed? Who is leading on this?
4. Where are discussions about educational gain taking place?
  - a. Are discussions happening between teaching staff and students?

It is unlikely that all of the possible activities that might contribute to educational gains for student can (or should) be evaluated so what to evaluate (and what not to) needs to be considered both strategically and operationally. Therefore, further considerations include:

5. What are the strategic and operational considerations which frame your decisions about what to evaluate and what not to evaluate? (think SMART)
  - a. What specific goals do you want to achieve?



- b. What measurable results (gains) are you aiming for?
  - c. Are these gains attainable/achievable considering time and resources?
  - d. Are they realistic (don't be too 'pie in the sky'!)?
  - e. Are they time-phased/timely (when are they going to be met)?
6. Finally, will the methods you are using (see previous section) give you measurable data?

## 7. Ways Forward and Next Steps

This section offers: an approach to using the schema and a set of recommendations.

### Using the Schema

(A larger version is at the end of this section).

1. Who you are	2. What you do	3. Purpose of EG	4. Achieving EG	5. Data plan and data measures	6. Use of data & evaluation
Key institutional demographics	Your mission	Why are you doing this?	What are you going to achieve and how are you going to do it?	What are you going to measure, how and when?	How and when will you know you have had impact?

Taking the following steps might be a helpful way forward for providers wanting to use the schema.

**Step 1:** Work through the reflective questions at the end of each section, in partnership with students.

**Step 2:** Fill-in the each of the boxes (again in partnership with students) paying particular attention to the articulation of evidence.

**Step 3:** Explore how each of the areas interconnect (and if they do not, then identify why)

**Step 4:** Test the alignment between all the boxes, including in both directions. Mapping both forwards and backwards tests out the strength of the theory of change.

**Step 5:** Use a RAG - or red/amber/green – rating or equivalent to foreground areas of concern.

### Recommendations

For future iterations of the TEF:

1. The Office for Students should consider grouping providers using their 'Size and Shape' of the student population [dashboard](#). This information could then be used to populate the first box of the schema, positioning the institution in a way that allows for comparative analysis across similar institutions and across groups of institutions.
2. Clear delineation of the remit of Access and Participation Plans and measures of educational gain should be made, to avoid unhelpful duplication or different measures or data used to account for the same outcome (e.g. addressing awarding gaps).
3. The OfS should consider requiring providers to standardise their reporting and data collection measures and/or benchmarking if they are to be used for educational gain. This relates to APP, NSS, GO, LEO, Guardian value-added, league table metrics and learning outcomes. Providers should not be allowed to select only 'the good parts'.
4. All providers should make explicit in their description of educational gain how students have been engaged in developing the approach to learning gain, the analysis of gains made, and the writing of the submission.

For providers engaging students in educational gain:

5. Students need to understand what educational gain is, and why they are being expected to demonstrate it. This means that the language used needs to be student (and staff) friendly.
6. Educational gain needs to be embedded in the curriculum where possible so that it feels like a seamless part of a students' degree and to ensure sufficient uptake.
7. Activities also need to be tangible to students they can see the value and benefit of engaging in, participating in, and evidencing, educational gain.

8. Educational gain should be aligned to graduate attributes so that students are not being expected to record gains twice. Both could be mapped as part of the same skills taxonomy and the same reporting frameworks could be used, at least in part.
9. Institutions might consider developing frameworks for students to reflect on their wider lives (family, work etc) and link this with their course and graduate attributes so that gains are as considered as holistically as possible. However, providers need to think carefully about claiming 'credit' for students' gains through work or other life outside of the institution.
10. Students need support to surface their skills and their gains. Not all students are able to do this without help. Opportunities should be embedded in the curriculum to allow students time to reflect and to rehearse and narrate this as their 'employable self'.
11. Internal awards are useful but only if all students have equitable opportunities to participate; consideration needs to be given to cost and time commitment.

For providers measuring gains:

12. A clear distinction should be made between educational goals (which may relate, for example, to the institutional mission) and educational gains (which need to be measurable).
13. A distinction also needs to be made between activities (what you want students to think, know, do) and gain (improvement or movement from a starting point).
14. Where possible objective and externally validated measures should be used to provide evidence of gain; if other measures are used then over-claiming from the evidence should be avoided.
15. Activities identified as enabling students to make gains should be aligned to what is measured and *vice versa*.
16. Quality processes (such as external examining and annual programme review) should not be used as evidence of educational gain.

For providers reporting gains:

17. Gains should be articulated at specific levels (individual student, student characteristic, programme, cohort, or institution) and this should be done systematically.
18. Gains made in relation to awarding gaps should be reported in the providers' Access and Participation Plan. If the provider does want to report on awarding gaps in relation to educational gain, then the same data should be used as in the APP.
19. Enabling metrics/measures - such as developing a sense of belonging or student satisfaction - have a place in the submission – but they are not evidence of educational gain and should not be reported as such.
20. Existing processes (such as module or programme review) are helpful, but the outcomes should also be reported in a standard way so that either all are used, or none are.
21. The use of stakeholder feedback (external examiners, employers) is not evidence of educational gain, unless it is closely tied into the definition being used by the provider. It can, however, offer contextual information in a broader narrative.
22. Robust monitoring and evaluation plans need to be developed.

**Educational Gain Schema**

1. Who you are	2. What you do	3. Purpose of EG	4. Achieving EG	5. Data plan and data measures	6. Use of data and evaluation
Key institutional demographics	Your mission	Why are you doing this?	What are you going to achieve and how are you going to do it?	What are you going to measure, how and when?	How and when will you know you have had impact?