Written Evidence Submitted by the Royal Historical Society

Executive Summary

* I.2 We welcome the Committee’s inquiry into value for money in Higher Education, but regret that its scope is not broader.
* II.2 We are sceptical that Destination Data will actually provide much meaningful information to assist prospective students choose universities and subjects.
* III.1-2 It is clear to us that TEF has both demonstrable strengths and limitations.
* III.4-6 the planned emphasis on ‘teaching intensity’ in TEF misses a fundamental point by conflating teaching with learning.
* V.1-4 we are fully committed to Social Justice in HE and we are advancing its agenda.
* VI.1 We hope the OfS will promote the interests of students within the broader context of the interests of HEIs.

I. The Royal Historical Society : a brief introduction

1. The Royal Historical Society, founded in 1868, strives to promote excellence in the discipline of History. It has over 4000 members drawn from higher education institutions (HEIs), secondary education, and the heritage sector, archives, museums, and libraries, mostly in the UK but also across the globe. It sponsors historical publications, provides financial support for postgraduates and early career researchers, and awards prizes for outstanding books, essays, student dissertations, public history writing and inspirational teaching. The Society also engages in public policy debates and developments, with standing Committees for both Research Policy and Educational Policy. The latter works closely with History (HE) UK and the Historical Association, with a particular interest in ‘A’ Level history and the transition to university as well as curriculum design and learning for undergraduates and postgraduates. In short, advancing teaching and learning is a high priority for the Society.

2. We welcome the Committee’s inquiry into value for money in Higher Education, but regret that its scope is not broader. In its current form, the inquiry fails to capture the full range of contributions to economy and society made by UK universities, and by History as a university-based discipline. Research intensive universities play a major role in the national economy, and all universities have a demonstrated beneficial impact locally as employers, hubs for enterprise and collaborators with external partners such as museums and partnership schools. This is all the more so now that impact and public engagement by HEIs has become prioritised by the REF (Research Excellence Framework). In 2011-12 the HE sector generated over £73 billion of output, and contributed 2.8% of UK GPD, up from 2.3% in 2007 ([http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/the-economic-impact-of-universities.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/%202017/%20the-economic-impact-of-universities.pdf)). Many universities attract large numbers of foreign students which, among much else, create networks with implications for future global connections, whether commercial, cultural or political. As for History graduates, a recent report demonstrated that a ‘truly remarkable number of history graduates have gone on to become the movers-and-shakers of modern-day Britain’. It listed ‘famous history graduates’, among them leaders in media, law, politics, civil service, trade unions and a significant number of VCs (D. Nicholls, *The Employment of History Graduates,* 2011). Any comprehensive, robust assessment will necessarily include these factors in its calculation of value for money.

3. It is likewise essential that the inquiry takes proper cognizance of the range of universities and other providers that make up the HEI sector and sidestep the dangers of treating the sector as an homogenous whole. An especial strength of the UK HE sector is its diversity: institutions have different strengths, attract diverse constituencies, and are embedded in (and contribute to) specific regional economies. Our own discipline is present across the full range of UK HEIs and Mission Groups, as evidenced in REF2014 in the submission of over 80 Units of Assessment to the History sub-panel.

4. It is certainly disappointing that only 35% of respondents to this year’s HE Policy Unit and HEA student experience believed their HE experience was ‘good’ or ‘very good’ value for money. Against this, it is worth noting that 73 HEIs in this year’s NSS received 85% or above for ‘overall satisfaction’ with their course. This suggests a complexity about student attitudes which merits investigation. We underline in particular the need for the Committee to distinguish carefully in its assessment between on the one hand an actual absence of value for money in the HE sector, and, on the other, a perceived absence and/or failure to recognize/articulate the presence of value for money. As noted above, substantial data testify to the value added to economy and society by HE activity, including the Humanities. The Committee should be mindful of the limits of the data with which it measures value in this context. Compared, moreover, to recent surveys of public satisfaction with for example Parliament (38% in 2017), the NHS overall (63% in 2016), and GP services (72% in 2016), the NSS scores appear to register very significant levels of satisfaction at many UK HEIs. ([https://secondreading.uk /elections/the-public-and-parliament-more-engaged-less-satisfied/](https://secondreading.uk/elections/the-public-and-parliament-more-engaged-less-satisfied/); <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/public-satisfaction-nhs-2016>.)

II. Graduate Outcomes and the use of destination data

1. The recent change in name of TEF (from Teaching Excellent Framework to Teaching Excellence Framework and Student Outcomes) underlines the increasing importance of destination data in the evolving assessment of value. The data drawn from DLHE and LEO can certainly assist policy makers pursuing equality and social justice. Graduate employment rates are lower among black and minority ethnic groups, as well as those known to have a disability (Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Longitudinal survey 2016-17, 2.5 years on); the gender pay gap that opens up from first employment persists thereafter. These glaring inequalities demand policy-makers’ attention.

2. But TEF itself seeks to assist prospective students’ choice of universities and subjects by using DLHE as a core metric from TEF2 onwards, and LEO as a supplementary metric from TEF3 onwards. We are sceptical that this will provide much meaningful information for prospective students for four reasons:

* based on extensive experience of university open days and dialogue with prospective Humanities students and their parents/carers, we do not believe that these data will be comprehended and used in the way intended by TEF’s champions. Prospective applicants and their advisors are already overwhelmed with available information, which they process imperfectly. Adding to this information without simplifying its presentation risks confusing rather than enlightening student choice.
* while it is clear that a graduate premium remains, notwithstanding the expansion of student numbers, other research suggests that once controls are applied for factors such as prior attainment, background, and region, there is little difference between subjects, except at the extremes (at one end, medicine, veterinary science and law, and the creative arts at the other).
* other evidence points to employers’ broad indifference to prospective employees’ degree subject, although they do pay more attention to the university at which degrees were obtained. This may mean that they are using a university as a proxy for other characteristics, such as background and prior attainment. Given the Committee’s concern for issues of social justice, including widening participation, this latter point merits especially careful scrutiny.
* there is evidence of sustained demand for analytical and managerial skills which are delivered by HEIs, regardless of degree subject. This helps to account for the persistence of the graduate premium. In light of this evidence, we remain unconvinced that the destination data will actually deliver the guidance that is intended. (P. Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation, IV. Subject Choice’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 27 (2017), pp. 24-6; Y. Liu and D. B. Grusky, ‘The Payoff to Skill in the Third Industrial Revolution’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 118 (2013), 1330–74.)

3. There are other hazards in deploying this data in TEF. Many universities have sizeable numbers of overseas students, who are not included in TEF’s metrics, making the data on graduate outcomes for some institutions incomplete and indeed misleading. Moreover, LEO as presently constituted has limited reach, covering graduate cohorts from 2003-4 to 2012-13. It would be more useful and more revealing to consider destination data over several decades, and establish whether a graduate degree does indeed confer flexibility and changes in career, in other words ‘graduate lifelong learning’, in a changing labour market.

4. We also believe that linking university degrees to earning power needs to be balanced by acknowledging the other benefits of a university education: the pursuit of curiosity and intellectual interest for its own sake, greater health and happiness; and for those who study History, the acquisition of humane and ethical qualities, giving its graduates an understanding of current events and the modern world, an insight into other cultures and different viewpoints and therefore the capacity to play an informed part in society. The public utility of these skills and values is evidenced, with specific respect to History degrees, in the 2011 study by Nicholls, cited above.

III. The quality and effectiveness of teaching

1. TEF is intended to be ‘essential to driving up standards of teaching’ (Jo Johnson, 24 February 2017). While TEF is still evolving, it is clear to us that it has both demonstrable strengths and limitations. A welcome consequence of TEF 2 has been that HEIs have prioritized the teaching and student outcomes agenda, and new revenue streams have been directed towards tackling a whole raft of issues, such as retention, employability, attainment and widening participation. A reading of providers’ submissions and the comments of the TEF panel also suggests that HEIs which demonstrated genuine engagement with students, and enhancement of teaching and learning, often received gold or silver awards. We applaud the importance of the TEF panel in offering an important element of peer-review, to counter-balance an over-reliance on metrics. It is vital to note that academic confidence in the REF derives very significantly from its predominant reliance on peer-review. If TEF is to command the confidence of participating institutions—and to attract wider institutional participation from the sector—then peer-review will need to be maintained, and perhaps enhanced, as integral to the process.

2. We also accept the logic of moving towards subject-level submissions, planned for TEF 5, since it fits with most of the objectives driving TEF: choice, raising esteem for teaching, and recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching. It is however essential that the fit between ‘subject’ and ‘course’ is satisfactorily addressed so that prospective applicants can make meaningful use of this data. Moreover, we are concerned about the planned incorporation of two new supplementary metrics for TEF 5: LEO, for the reasons expressed above, and ‘teaching intensity’ with its focus on contact hours and class size.

3. With regard to ‘teaching intensity’, there is certainly some significant variation in contact hours which individual HEIs will need to register, and the case for quality (as much as the quantity) of contact time needs to be articulated clearly for the benefit of prospective students. Absent from ‘teaching intensity’, however, is attention to many key teaching resources that enrich (or, in their absence, can impoverish) learning. In History, these include access to manuscript resources, museum collections, online databases of primary and secondary sources, libraries and collaborative learning opportunities with local and national charities, heritage organisations, etc. Active engagement with resources such as these sharpens students’ transferable analytical skills and can be pivotal in their subsequent graduate employment.

4. More broadly, the planned emphasis on ‘teaching intensity’ misses a fundamental point by conflating teaching with learning. Learning is the ultimate objective for students (and presumably for their prospective employees), and is what is assessed for their degree classification. As is clearly reflected in the History subject benchmark, university study of History is not designed to fill our students with knowledge so much as to inform, direct and inspire them to become active, effective and independent learners and critical assessors of evidence. History graduates should be capable, indeed, of creating their own knowledge. History confers many invaluable graduate attributes and transferable skills, such as critical thinking, close reading and careful attention to the subtleties of language, powers of advocacy on paper or in person, and ‘learning how to learn’ (D. Nicholls, *The employability of History students,* 2005).

5. Learning such skills occurs through contact hours, certainly, but also through independent or collaborative work outside seminars or tutorials, in reading, reflection and preparation of written or oral work. In so doing, students also turn to subject librarians, pastoral and learning support services. Learning is a complex product of the interplay of academic hours and types of tuition, size of classes, library and cognate resources, the learning culture and sense of academic community, and, of course, the research expertise of the teacher. Many of these processes cannot be satisfactorily captured by a metric on teaching intensity.

6. Importantly, the type of learning outlined above, characteristic of excellent History and wider Humanities learning, is genuinely challenging for students. Its level of difficulty—relative to History in schools, which places significantly fewer demands on independent learning and critical analysis—is entirely appropriate for university-level study and its value in the workplace is reflected in the graduate premium. The NSS results must be read in this context. Policy-makers may wish to weigh students’ short-term perceptions against their long-term outcomes. More broadly, we would welcome further research into ‘learning gains’ which has the potential via TEF to address institutional or subject-level ‘value added’ for students, and thus to offer a much more valuable yardstick than ‘teaching intensity’.

7. Cross-national UK comparison of HE policy raises the question of whether TEF is in fact the most effective available vehicle for driving up teaching standards and ensuring value of money. Scottish HEIs use an annual internal audit each year, which addresses quality assurance and enhancement, the results of which are submitted to Scottish Funding Council. It uses the external assessors, empowers the student voice, and allows a dialogue between reviewers, staff and students over methods of teaching and the best use of resources for the benefit of students. Our consultations with Scottish RHS Fellows suggests that this system commands wide respect in the sector. Such an alternative model addresses teaching and learning directly, and largely avoids the proxy metrics central to TEF2.

IV. Senior management pay in universities

1. The levels of senior management remuneration and their potential links to value for money are beyond the remit of the Society’s Education Policy Committee.

V. Social justice in HE and support for disadvantaged students

1. The Society is fully committed to this agenda. A beneficial by-product of the introduction of £9000 fees in 2012 was the access agreement by universities to widen participation, and the split metrics in TEF2 looked at variations in core metrics by gender, disability ethnicity and age, among others, with the aim of encouraging ‘providers’ to identity and address these inequities among students. This is part of a much broad agenda for social justice in HE, which needs concerted action from policy-makers, HEIs and disciplinary bodies such as the Society.

2. History at university has conventionally had relatively little appeal for white working class males and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. Explanatory factors for the latter failure include the Eurocentric curriculum in many HEIs, the attainment gap in degree outcomes, and a longstanding preference for vocational subjects, a subject choice which overlooks the invaluable transferable skills that a Humanities subjects inculcate. The Society is playing its own part in addressing the severe under-representation of BAME historians (both students and staff) in HEIs, by setting up a race equality working group (May 2017). This working group will seek to provide university departments and other institutions involved in historical research and dissemination with robust data on the current state of the discipline with regard to race and ethnicity and to create a platform for effecting meaningful change. The working group plans to publish a report on race equality in the discipline of History in UK HE in October 2018.

3. Gender equality is also a high priority for the HE sector. Our report *Gender Equality and Historians in Higher Education* (2015) has become an invaluable reference-point for history departments in the UK which are reviewing their policies and procedures, and we plan that the guide be revised and reissued in 2018. In it we touch upon student inequality, inviting colleagues to investigate whether more men than women obtain firsts or distinctions, and to reflect on their teaching practices in the light of invisible bias and stereotype threat. As increasing numbers of university historians apply for Athena SWAN certification, these gender disparities will (rightly) come under increasing scrutiny in our discipline.

4. We draw attention, too, to the calamitous decline in adult and part-time higher education opportunities. Over the last decade, numbers of part-time students have halved as a percentage of the student cohort and dropped by more than half in numerical terms ([https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-rates-in-higher-education-2006-to-2016](https://www.gov.uk/government%20/statistics/participation-rates-in-higher-education-2006-to-2016)). This is a consequence of universities folding part-time provision into full-time courses as well as changes to funding regime. The result is a serious threat to opportunities for ‘lifelong learning’ and the chances of retooling in a flexible labour market. In particular, current HE policy and funding makes re-entering education for those with full-time jobs or caring responsibilities all the more difficult. Given the predicted expansion of the workforce as people’s working lives expand, this decline in provision needs addressing and ways sought to reverse this trend.

VI. The role of the Office of Students

1. We endorse the Higher Education Commission’s challenge to the OfS to act as an engine of social mobility, and back Sir Michael Barber’s affirmation that ‘the autonomy of institutions and academic freedom are fundamental building blocks for a successful sector’ (26 June 2017). However, the promise of both Sir Michael and Nicola Dandridge to provide ‘an unflinching focus on the student’ carries with it some dangers. Over the medium- and long-term, student interests are best advanced by acknowledging the needs and aspirations of the broader academic communities in which they study. This environment includes academic staff and fellow-students working as teachers, whose research-based or -led teaching is central to the curriculum and culture of many HEIs. Too narrow a focus on students will not advance the interests of the institutions in which they learn and instead will risk damaging the educational experience.