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# ‘Structured agency’, normalising power, and third space workers: higher education professional services staff as regulatory policy actors

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## ABSTRACT

As the English Higher Education (HE) system becomes characterised by centralised regulation, many professional services staff increasingly occupy significant positions sitting between traditional administrative roles, academia and management with responsibility for interpreting and implementing key policies. This study presents findings from a nested institutional case study, in a research-intensive institution, of the experiences of professional services staff implementing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Examining how policy ‘landed’ in two academic schools, the findings present staff acting as both operational and strategic drivers: experiencing the regulatory policy cycle as opportunities, subjugation and threat. On the one hand, the high-stakes nature of the TEF led to the development of policy-specific, third space-type roles with enhanced employment contracts, prestige, and agency and the reformulation of working relationships. On the other, the TEF, as but one feature of the regulatory burden on institutions, provided only a limited kind of agency – a term referred to here as ‘structured agency’ to staff. Through analysis of the diversity of roles, experiences and skills within the professional services workforce, this paper highlights the critical importance of professional services staff in a complex regulatory policy process, and the ways in which policy enactment in this space both constrains some individuals while, given adequate resource, enables others to carve out new career spaces and career trajectories. As the Office for Students (OfS) continues to normalise its power in institutions, these insights have important implications for labour force management, in turn allowing for the meaningful enactment of central policy within universities.

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## Introduction and background

Higher Education (HE) professional services staff represent a minoritized voice in HE policy discourse and research (Allen-Collinson 2007) with even very recent work describing the invisibility individuals in this role can feel within institutions (Akerman 2020). These staff are frequently conceptualised in reductive terms as the lesser counterparts to academic/research staff and positioned, as ‘minions of management’ (Allen-Collinson 2009) or ‘docile clerks’ (Scott, 1995) implementing the wishes of university managers. However, the increased breadth of specialist, centralised HE regulation has required a restructuring of the HE workforce (Shore 2008; Perkins 2019; McKie 2020) and a blurring of the traditional boundaries between these two ‘groups’ of staff (Watermeyer and Rowe 2021). Many

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professional services staff operate in hybridised third spaces, in a liminal zone between academia and administration (Whitchurch 2008), taking on a range of new roles related to, for example, knowledge exchange, public engagement, and student outcomes, and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Oancea 2019).

In institutions, these liminal zones are key sites for the interpretation and implementation of regulatory policy. As institutions become more heavily regulated, they rely on the expertise and proactivity of school-based staff who, as junior or mid-career professionals, do not routinely author institutional strategic documentation but are required to mediate and navigate complex discursive spaces (Saunders and Sin 2015). In this way, much like has been done with teaching staff in schools by Ball (2015), professional services staff should be categorised as key policy actors, interpreting policy within institutional contexts: often alongside their own individual career trajectories and identities.

Despite comprising half of the HE workforce, this is an under-researched and under-theorised area and understanding the mechanism of the regulatory policy process through the lenses of those involved has important practical and theoretical implications for framing policy enactment and structuring the HE workforce sustainably.

This study captured an institutional case study of the initial pilot implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in two disciplinary schools in order to examine the ways in which professional services staff work as regulatory policy actors, the ways in which the TEF policy was shaped and enacted in the selected institution in this critical discursive space, and the implications for how we should conceptualise the HE workforce in broad terms.

### *The TEF as regulatory policy*

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a regulatory initiative introduced by the UK government in 2015 to increase 'teaching excellence', inform student choices and help meet the needs of employers (OfS, 2018) by awarding HE Providers in England bronze, silver, or gold medals. The TEF is a metrics-based regulation requiring institutions to provide data and a qualitative submission that focus 'on learning environment, learning gain (more recently, educational gain), and student labour market outcomes as proxies for excellence (Morris 2017). This encapsulates the discursive shift in HE policy that emphasises the economic purposes of HE (Ashwin 2020), the datafication and marketisation of the sector (Su 2022), and increasingly centralised competitive regulation through the OfS.

As such, the TEF is not ideologically neutral (Oancea 2019). While it can be seen as part of a broader discursive focus in Western HE systems on 'teaching excellence' (Gunn 2018), the TEF was widely considered the flagship policy of the 'new' HE regulatory OfS and a vehicle for the regulated competition of a quasi-market that emphasises student choice and financial returns on HE. It can be identified as part of the 'cascade' of public sector reforms inspired by neoliberal imperatives (Tomlinson, Enders, and Naidoo 2018) which, particularly, through its choice of metrics, encourage top-down performance management and student choice and voice (Ball 2015; Barkas et al. 2019).

In its prioritisation of publicly available metrics which prioritise quantitative 'outcomes', the TEF generates institutional 'competition' that both encourages an increased investment in output quality (DBIS, 2015a). It equally further legitimises an already dominant narrative of teaching excellence prioritising performativity and high-skill employability (Skelton 2005). This model stands in stark contrast with 'alternative' conceptualisations of HE excellence, which root teaching quality in its ability to transform students, communities, and knowledge itself (Ashwin, Abbas, and Mclean 2013; Ashwin 2020), while providing opportunities for self-formation (Marginson 2018). This conceptualisation emerges from academic and pedagogic specialists and aligns with the internally controlled quality assurances of the past.

The TEF, and more broadly, external attempts at regulating teaching excellence, has been viewed as vehicles for neoliberal agendas and treated critically within the academic literature (Barkas et al. 2019; Gunn and Fisk 2013) with the use of student feedback in such attempts seen as a coercive

mechanism to 'govern' and regulate the academic workforce (Thiel 2019). This externally imposed change, and 'transparency tool' has bred 'institutionalised distrust' of all those considered to propagate it (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Gunn 2018). For TEF, existing ideological tensions have been exacerbated by questions surrounding the rigour of data collection and reporting, being deemed unrepresentative, ineffective and oversimplifying the influence of variables such as social capital on graduate outcomes (Frankham 2017; Royal Statistical Society 2018). Broadly, those who consider 'excellence' in transformative terms criticise the policy as unfit for purpose, with the TEF viewed as a direct challenge to community solidarity and subjects, such as the Arts, not traditionally measured by financial returns (O'Thomas 2019).

As such, the TEF can be seen as a regulatory policy mechanism of coercive control and subjugation and a site of potential subversion and resistance by the academic community (Tomlinson, Enders, and Naidoo 2018; Barkas et al. 2019). This framing necessarily positions the TEF as a macro-level external policy imposed upon the academic community of teaching practitioners (at micro-level); likely to limit agency and act as a manifestation of and vehicle for normalising regulatory power. It leaves, however, little room for understanding the meso, disciplinary-level, processes and mechanisms of how regulatory policy in general terms, is operationalised: how policy is framed and interpreted; how it is presented to the wider institutional workforce; how data is collected; how narratives are formed; how returns are written and submitted; etc.

Rudd's (2017) examination of the policy formation and enactment process highlights the impact of macro, meso and micro contexts on the ways in which policy is both accepted and integrated into practice, how it 'bends' as it is translated from the centre to the periphery, and how different institutional contexts will shape the process of policy enactment. This is particularly clear in a vertically stratified system where institutional prestige and capital have a bearing on the extent to which radical policy interpretation can take place. Viewing policy through this lens builds on Ball's suggestion that policy is not just a static moment but as an ongoing discursive process of making and remaking across different contexts (Ball 2015). Significantly for the HE community, this framing emphasises the importance of educators as policy actors who are both subjugated to and shaping policy (Lipsky, 1980). We have adopted this discursive understanding of policy enactment in our analysis, examining the experiences of the professional services staff involved in framing, shaping, making and remaking the policy and how they engage in and through their discursive contexts.

Therefore, although the study examines the broad question of how staff understand and enact the TEF, given that the TEF is frequently positioned as a mechanism of subjugation through regulation (Barkas et al. 2019; Watermeyer and Rowe 2021), we have adopted Ball's use of Foucault's understanding of discourse, and have paid particularly close attention to power within the discursive space of TEF policy. Taking this as a broad analytical framework, we have examined how regulatory policy enactment, coercive power, and normalising power (Foucault 1974) intersect with the individual agency of the professional services staff who work on the frontline of TEF policy.

## Methodology

The research question has been addressed through an iterative, nested case study (Yin 2014), examining two 'academic schools', in an arts and humanities faculty, within a research-intensive Higher Education Institution in England (in the Russell Group). This case study institution was selected as being broadly representative of English research-intensive universities and, consequently as having the potential to illustrate tensions between teaching and research requirements and the wider workforce structures associated with these activities.

The two 'schools' in the arts and humanities were chosen due to their exposure to the subject-level TEF. Between 2017 and 2019, the TEF was piloted at subject level with a small number of volunteer institutions to test models and selected proxy-metrics. One school (school A) had undergone two rounds of the subject-level TEF pilot and the other (school B) had completed its first pilot submission a month before the fieldwork began in 2019. Although prominent in policy debate, the

TEF is part of an eco-system of agendas underpinning HE workplace culture. A case study methodology was selected as a means of gaining a holistic understanding of the institutional culture and context; situating the interpretation and implementation of the TEF within a complex range of discourses and demands on faculty staff time (Yin, 2014).

Data collection in each school took three forms. Firstly, analysis of internal policy documents (related to regulation and the implementation of the TEF) to provide in-depth understanding of staffing and committee structures and hierarchies, institutional semantic norms, existing local teaching policies and practices, and institutionalised conceptualisations of teaching excellence. Secondly, focus groups with key stakeholders involved in the implementation of the TEF were undertaken. These deliberately brought together professional services staff with academic managers to unpack the complex relationships between these two groups of staff responsible for day-to-day policy interpretation and implementation within their units.

The focus groups were deliberately heterogeneous (with a mix of gender, academic and non-academic roles, and levels of seniority) in order to examine conceptualisations of policy implementation across all key stakeholders involved in the process and to understanding policy implementation across embedded institutional hierarchies. This was seen as providing an important opportunity for meaning making, for differences of opinion to be discussed constructively, and for points of agreement or disagreement across different roles to be analysed. Onwuegbuzie et al.'s (2009) 'Interlocuter Framework' was invaluable in tracking participant engagement and agreement levels throughout the focus groups, allowing for a more precise count of consensus for topics. However, we were aware that this presented the potential for challenging power dynamics, enforced silences, or groupthink (Roulston, 2011) and so paid careful attention to managing power differentials and observing where individual participants might feel unable to share their opinions openly. These issues were then picked up in the third research method, semi-structured individual interviews, where individuals were encouraged to expand on potential points of tension that emerged in the focus groups.

In each school, participants were selected purposively as 'information rich' (Patton 2002) with roles relating to implementation of national policy, HE regulation or focused explicitly on the TEF. To facilitate initial conversations, participants were asked to work together to determine the provenance of quotes (government/institution/ faculty) taken from the document analysis. Following the focus groups, participants were invited to semi-structured interviews that allowed for a more detailed examination of discursive formations, staffing structures, participant experiences, and inter-staff tensions. As highlighted, this provided additional insights away from the challenges of group dynamics.

Across both schools 16 participants took part in the study; 15 were interviewed separately (Figure 1, above). The roles of the staff groups involved in the study were fluid and not always tightly bound to individual academic schools, with several professional services staff working at faculty level on the TEF across both academic schools involved in this study. At the same time, the professional services staff were not a heterogeneous group and comprised those working at a strategic and managerial level as well as those more involved in the operational aspects of TEF implementation. Overall, participants included nine professional services staff working at an operational level (PSO), three professional services staff at managerial level (PSM) and four academic managers (AM). Of those working in either of the professional services, several were based in central 'Student Services'.

Considering the lack of exploration of non-academic staff experience through the lens of the regulatory policy in which they work, the study's research problem was best serviced by using reflexive thematic analysis. Policy documents, as described above, were analysed using an approach rooted in critical discourse analysis; with sources considered within their discursive context, and attention being particularly paid to the 2012 introduction of fees and the 2017 inception of the OfS. The documents' prominent messages were uncovered by inductively coding discourse strands (resultant notions: competition, markets, and students as consumers) and

Title	School	Focus group?	Interview?
Professional Services Manager (Student Services)	School A	Y	Y
Professional Services Manager	School A	Y	Y (telephone)
Professional Services Administrator	School A	Y	Y (telephone)
Professional Services Manager*	School A	Y	Y
Academic Manager*	School A	Y	Y
Professional Services Manager*	School A	N	Y
Academic Senior Manager*	School A	N	Y
Professional Services Manager*	School B	Y	Y
Academic Manager	School B	Y	Y
Professional Services Manager	School B	Y	Y
Professional Services Manager	School B	Y	Y
Professional Services Administrator (Student Services)	School B	Y	Y
Professional Services Manager (Student Services)	School B	Y	Y
Professional Services Manager (Student Services)	School B	Y	N
Professional Services Administrator	School B	N	Y
Academic Manager	School B	N	Y

Figure 1. Research participants (\* those directly involved in either TEF submission).

analysing documents' structural features such as underpinning ideas in the introduction and conclusion. This allowed for greater understanding of the ways in which the TEF and the culture of increasing regulation are rationalised and theorised by actors at each policymaking 'level' (Bryman, 2012, 557). Final themes were conceptualised by analysing primary participant data through a locally relevant, albeit flexible, framework, deductively rooted in literature and policy documents. This allowed researchers to explore primary data at a latent level (Braun et al. 2019). Given the loose boundaries between the academic schools, focus group (including Interlocutor Framework) and interview data were analysed holistically. A total of 107 nodes were created, which were 'coded-on' to produce 10 key concepts (including, regulatory overwhelm, professional uncertainty and professional progression), further collapsing into four conceptualisations of individuals' perspectives and experiences of the TEF (TEF as an opportunity; TEF as uncertainty; TEF as exacerbating tensions; TEF as a threat) (Bazeley, 2007). TEF as uncertainty and tensions has been combined for this journal submission. NVivo allowed directional and associative relationships to be set up across the three datasets which provided an additional check for consistency of final themes (Perkins 2019).

## Findings

Findings have been arranged into three key themes, outlining the different ways in which participants conceptualised the TEF and its implementation across both schools and the relationships they formed with regulatory policy as policy actors. These are presented below, whilst identifying where any consensus or tensions arose between data collection methods and participant groups. Insights are not always associated to a particular school. This is to retain the anonymity of what is a small participant group, because of the limited difference between the responses of the two disciplinary 'groups', which is discussed briefly below, and because, as the fieldwork was conducted, it became apparent that the boundaries between the schools were increasingly blurred in relation to regulatory policy, with key members of staff shifting between school-based positions and more centralised positions. As such the findings are largely presented holistically at institutional level rather than at school level.

## Regulatory policy as opportunity

Across focus groups and interviews, the coming of new regulatory policy as an 'opportunity', at faculty, school and individual levels, arose. Firstly, several participants emphasised the idea that the process of implementing the TEF should be viewed as a key strategic opportunity for enhancing practice with the required 'succinct evidence-driven' submissions viewed as 'an unprecedented means of joining the dots' (AM, School B). Several participants suggested that the TEF was not measuring a 'fait accompli' but could be used as the basis of a structured developmental process. Whilst not all were as enthusiastic, it was generally agreed that institutions should 'make the most' (PSM, School A) out of it, repeating the perspective expressed in institutional policy documents relating to the TEF. Several participants, particularly those in managerial roles, took this further, arguing that the TEF's focus on the student experience should be leveraged to 'redress' what they saw as an imbalance between teaching and research: 'there really is an unprecedented opportunity to [stop] teaching [being] the poor cousin of research' (AM, School B).

This view was predominantly expressed by two senior participants, one in an academic role and another in professional services and could be seen as illustrating the ways in which those involved in implementing regulatory policy explicitly viewed it as a mechanism to exert power over the wider HE workforce, accentuating much documented tensions between teaching staff and management. Successfully implementing initiatives meant to 'improve' graduate outcomes, particularly around 'plugging the digital skills gap' in Arts was perceived as particularly dependent on the coercive nature of the TEF.

This strategic leveraging of the power embedded in regulatory policy could similarly be seen in participants who explicitly discussed the affordances of the TEF in terms of expanding the professional services workforce. Half of participants emphasised that policy initiatives (like the REF and the TEF) require new kinds of support staff with knowledge and expertise specific to the initiative (as highlighted by, for example, Whitchurch 2008; Oancea 2019; Watermeyer and Rowe 2021). In the case study institution two new teams were created to meet the growing external emphasis on teaching enhancement and the student experience, one focused on 'Education and Student Experience' (ESE) and another focused on 'Educational Excellence'. The new members of staff were comparatively described as experts in policy development and 'value-added' initiatives, focused on promoting 'student voice' and 'improving graduate outcomes' (PSM, School A): 'Everyone knows that there is a lot of potential in this role [...] before (in Student Services) things were maybe done for the sake of being done' (PSO, School A).

These new roles were highlighted as being flexible, collaborative, with high levels of autonomy and agency, and directly responsible for policy interpretation and implementation at an institutional and school-specific level. For example, one individual was notably responsible for collecting, facilitating, and proofing the department's subject-level TEF submission which allowed them to effectively access this new, reasonably established space between traditional administration and academia. These roles were also institutionally recognised, with colleagues' regularly attending exclusive teaching and enhancement networks meant to support those working on the wider TEF agenda: 'it's nice that we can all still be in touch ... through the new university-wide education and student experience network' (PSM, School B).

During the fieldwork, five participants were in the 'lucky few' to 'cross over' (PSO, School A) from the admin-heavy Student Services and described the prestige, responsibility and autonomy associated with their new roles. For these participants, the TEF presented an opportunity for professional development, career progression, and professional agency with the power embedded in regulatory policy was leveraged in a constructive way as a private good.

However, the freedom associated with these new roles was starkly juxtaposed against other professional services staff, most often those in 'Student Services'. Though responsible for organising the student experience within schools (including student complaints, forums and a range of quality responsibilities) they felt they had limited understanding of or control over the 'prestigious' TEF



agenda. These participants consistently described their work in negative terms: 'there's a real element of powerlessness, the way that management and academic staff speak to you [...] it's a very different tone to the rest of the university' (PSO, School A).

For these participants, the TEF, was an invisible, confusing but highly subjugating force 'out there' and another tool for those in more senior positions to exert coercive control over their professional lives. As seen briefly above, this view was somewhat reflected in comments made by a small number of senior managers who explicitly highlighted the coercive potential of the TEF.

## Regulatory policy as subjugation

Most participants were to some extent, either ambivalent towards or critical of the exercise, linking it with institutional restructuring and other internal and external policy initiatives, often struggling to differentiate where one ended and another began. The TEF was viewed as an addition to the existing regulatory landscape, with one participant, for example, arguing: 'there is an awful lot of confusion about the TEF, how it collided with other things that have happened here and why, it's all quite hard to grasp' (AM, School B).

Almost all participants linked the TEF with wider centralised regulatory activities, like the REF and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and suggested that all these initiatives were 'technocratic and bureaucratic' and 'box-ticking exercises' (AM, School A). Although many participants were involved in the process of 'ticking the [regulatory] boxes', they too saw these initiatives as 'meaningless tinkering' (School B) with regulatory requirements. This was particularly the case for the school that had not yet undergone a full round of the pilot which appeared more detached from the process, with more than half of professional service staff suggesting it 'wasn't relevant to their role'. However, not acknowledging the TEF's incoming agenda appeared hard for those in School A and all Academic Managers, who took the TEF requirements more personally and shared feeling that embedded within these initiatives, was an assumption that 'existing provision and practice were inadequate, fragmented and unreliable' (AM).

Regardless of participants' perceptions of the TEF itself, they described how the constantly changing regulatory landscape, characterised by policy overload, disempowered them in some way. This mainly arose in interviews, where individuals likely felt more able to admit that they did not 'know it all'. Although they felt on the 'frontline' of regulatory policy, the process of implementation was deemed mechanical, with limited room for interpretation or agency. This meant that implementation was a site of tension and, for many, anxiety, with the TEF viewed as an additional burden within an everchanging regulatory landscape characterised by bureaucracy. One participant made sense of the various excellence agendas as a singular 'process of unification' where the state and the institution were attempting to implement a 'single standard' and homogenise practice. Several individuals highlighted that the way that information was shared (or not) with them exacerbated the exclusionary nature of policies like the TEF, stating that key guidance documents were often saved in 'hard to locate places' in a language that 'sounded like management speak' (PMO, School B). This careful control of information related to the TEF could be interpreted as a mechanism of control, with those who had the perceived agency to 'remake' and interpret the policy closely guarding that ability and controlling how the process of policy interpretation could take place. Interview data revealed that some individuals appeared to acquire a lot of responsibility in the creation of the school narratives. One non-academic participant was described as 'co-ordinating' the process in School B: 'I took the lead in coordinating the humanities [...] I identified a number of different datasets, collected those and then set the deadlines [for academic staff]' PSM.

However, even those working on the interpretation of the TEF described how resource scarcity also left them feeling isolated in the policy process; suggesting that their own agency was still limited. 'Fractured' communication from the institution's central TEF team and periods of 'radio silence', meant that this individual felt required to seek out external resources to inform guidance documents for academic staff in the school. The final guidance was based on a HEPI report (Beech,



2017), a 'how-to' guide on how to create a successful TEF narrative, based on the provider-level awards. As such the participant's guidance document stressed that academic staff should 'avoid sweeping statement [...] and make sure that there was clear evidence of impact' PS4 (H)\*.

This precarious process was manifested in broader tensions over policy ownership. Participants were acutely aware of the controversial nature of the TEF, particularly in terms of the metrics and how teaching excellence is conceptualised within the exercise. It became clear during the focus groups that all professional services staff actively avoided taking a position on defining teaching excellence in front of their academic colleagues. Despite many of these individuals leading teams that were defining good student outcomes and experience or facilitating conversations about excellence in teaching. When asked to describe teaching excellence one manager said: 'sounds like a question for the academics' (PSM, School A). Therefore, despite the TEF appearing to justify the development of more empowered non-academic staff roles, this cultural change had not been internalised and the interpretation and implementation of regulatory policy continued to be viewed as split along tradition lines.

In sum, many participants felt alienated from the exercise at institutional policy level, despite expectations placed upon them at the operational level, consequently feeling excluded and demotivated: 'maybe people would be more motivated if they knew why [they] were doing the things that [they] do' (PMO, School A). Thus, although some professional service staff were expected to engage in the policy process and had some agency in the interpretation of central policy, the structures of the workforce and traditional demarcations around decision-making limited that agency such that it was always manifested in and shaped by regulatory and workforce structures.

### Regulatory policy as threat

This tension between structure and agency was particularly emphasised by many participants describing tensions between being excluded from policy interpretation yet expected to implement key aspects of the TEF, with this seen as spilling out into their wider roles. This was particularly apparent for those working in student services who felt that their relationships with students were threatened through the regulatory processes of the TEF: 'TEF has reset a lot of relationships [...] it's been detrimental to the way that students interact with us I think it's much more, it can be more adversarial' PSM (School A)

These 'frontline' staff expressed feeling inextricably and for the most part, helplessly, part of an increasingly transactional arrangement. More specifically, the TEF was perceived to be a significant shift towards universities as business and thus legitimising the 'student-customer' persona: 'Students quote the "9 grand" a lot now, which can be difficult if they've just done something like plagiarism (laugh)' PSM (School A).

The wider influence of the regulatory policy agenda was viewed as dominating these participants' work and undermining previous relationships. As such, it was perceived as a threat.

At the same time, the creation of new 'enhancement' roles associated with the TEF was highlighted as a threat to the occupational stability and identity of other professional services staff. This was most poignant for those involved in Student Services, who held, and spoke freely about, their precarious, fixed-term employment contracts. The new enhancement roles, while also affording holders more autonomy and responsibility, had better contractual conditions. This led to clear tensions within the professional services workforce: 'there's envy of this [new] team because it's all permanent contracts [...]'. Participants spoke about their own precarity, citing the constant threat associated with fixed-term contracts that might not be renewed or enabled staff to be 'uprooted' and 'moved to a different hub at a moment's notice' based on 'student need' and various campus implementation plans. An administrator who, at the time of the study had recently moved from Student Services into one of these new roles, described the tensions in the school as 'quite difficult territory' that could cause 'anxiety to everyone involved'. Despite this vulnerability many participants described feeling positioned as agents of the government, in some ways collaborative with or

sympathetic to the coercive power of the policy within the discursive landscape of the institution. To those not involved in the process these individuals were seen as ‘centralisers’ who, like university leadership, were ‘quick to jump on OfS’ command’: ‘I see the people administrating these things from the top – the centralisers – but people out in the provinces who have not really had much say in the process” (AM, School B).

This further threatened relationships between professional services and academic staff while at the same time reinforcing discursive constructions of some professional services staff and academic managers as bureaucratic agents within their institutional settings.

## Discussion

This project has analysed the role and experiences of a small cross-section of staff as policy actors in universities. In doing so, the complexity of regulatory policy interpretation and enactment in HE institutions has been highlighted and the differentiated experiences of staff across different strata of the professional services workforce. The study has shed light on the reality and consequences of individuals interpreting and implementing regulatory policy on the front line, often under strain caused by lack of resource, knowledge, experience or necessary skills. Above all else, participants discussed the TEF as existing within a larger culture of both internal and external change, echoing Tomlinson, Enders, and Naidoo (2018) assertion that the TEF is part of the ‘cascade’ of reforms creating the larger neoliberal agenda. Oancea’s (2013) description of the ‘hyperactivity’ surrounding the REF and impact agenda is a useful way of summarising participants’ perceptions of the TEF and enhancement-related change. The idea of TEF ‘[spurring] to action’ lots of activity broadly related to the student experience meant that participants appeared overwhelmed whilst somewhat accepting ‘consistent inconsistency’ as the operational and organisational norm. This was more pronounced for the school that had undergone two rounds of TEF pilot submissions and for the small subset of Academic Managers who took part, who, whilst finding it as equally challenging to identify exactly **which** change TEF had ‘spurred on’, appeared more convinced of the impact that this agenda had on their day-to-day. In terms of the school, this may suggest that even if individuals do not have direct or obvious responsibilities within the policy-making apparatus, ‘exposure’ or vicarious pressures can be felt through the proximity of peers engaged in policy enactment.

Whilst professional services staff broadly understood ‘teaching excellence’ as Ashwin, Abbas, and Mclean (2013)’s pedagogical discourse of quality through transformation, the sense of policy ‘overwhelm’ was clear even for those that attended the exclusive institutional ‘enhancement’ networks. The lack of community recognition and internalisation of how enhancement staff should be facilitating policy discussion left most under-confident and unwilling to engage in meaningful discussion of the complexities of ‘teaching excellence’, turning instead to generic, strategic documents in which to ground their understanding. This lack of unified, locally relevant definition is a direct consequence and demonstration of the structured agency staff embodied. While the TEF theoretically provided critical space for policy interpretation and the exercising of agency, the under-developed policy environment caused tensions across teams tasked with curating and maintaining local teaching standards.

To a certain extent, the focus groups, which encouraged discussion of communal definitions of excellence, helped individuals reflect on their positionality in power structures, including relationships between staff, exposing the impact of complex and invisible elements of power in their everyday work (Hoy 1986). This demonstrates a desire to have clearer and more relevant information regarding regulation that is perceived to be coercing changes in individuals’ work environment. The appeal for more information on regulation, from all levels of ‘administration’, also adds nuance to Kehm’s (2015) assertion that managerial and administrative staff are ‘essentially compliance officers’. Staff who were engaged with the mechanisms of regulatory change suggested that they gained all their basic information from committees that they sat on. This was particularly the case for those with access to institutional-wide committees exploring teaching enhancement. Access to information was

the first step in acquiring the agency to be part of wider conversations regarding the TEF. Conversely, the careful management of information flow restricted other members of staff to fully engage in the process of policy interpretation in a meaningful way, excluding them from the policy process.

Exploring the process behind the TEF submissions revealed significant insight into the identities and interactions between 'agents', specifically the changing nature of professional services as they step into policy work. The decentralised nature of the OfS' governance leaves space for actors to take on larger responsibilities. There remains a practical-knowledge gap between what professional services staff contribute to the regulatory process. Whilst it is reasonable to assume that this growing and diverse group plays some role in the co-ordination of the regulatory landscape, the extent this occurs, and by consequence, the impact this has on how effectively the academic community pivots to meet external change remains obscured. The findings support the notion that the administrative workforce is expanding (Shelley 2005; Baltaru and Soysal 2017) and speak to Whitchurch's notion of third space staff with roles that offer individuals agency, movement, and capital for future development opportunities. Whitchurch describes these roles as 'unbounded' and only those with enough 'relevant' experience hold the capital to participate in valuable institutional networks. In this example the valuable institutional networks included ready access to the site of policy enactment and a broader ability to leverage the regulatory power embedded in the TEF to craft a space to exert agency in the process of policy interpretation and enactment. With limited guidance from above, these individuals set the agenda for TEF submissions, including general tone and the importance of using quantitative evidence, and exerted power over peers.

Thus, while the TEF presented an opportunity for some individuals, this was also seen as coming at a cost to other professional services staff – in this case those involved in Student Services. The Student Service model captured in this work builds on the depiction of Whitchurch's 'bounded' staff group. In the use of student satisfaction metrics (NSS), the TEF equally adds weight to the student experience agenda, encouraging HEIs to prioritise the needs of a growing and diversifying student body through use of a procedural and highly mobile (precarious) group of support staff. The trend towards centralisation, for the benefit of the student 'user', was discussed at length by participants. Those in Student Services were more likely to describe the TEF as a 'disciplinary stick', and echoing O'Leary's study on the exclusivity of institutional TEF consultations (O'Leary, Cui, and French 2019), Student Service staff had not been part of the groups and committees that made up the faculty policymaking apparatus.

As a central, somewhat ambiguous and 'high stakes' policy, the TEF has evidenced its capacity for exacerbating occupational divides, and ultimately threatening school unity. Indeed, for most participants, the TEF, in its clarity of aims but obscurity of scope was perceived to be a danger to aspects of workplace culture already creaking under pressure. Existing stakeholder relationships (notably between government, institution, faculty, and students) were considered to have (further) deteriorated, whilst previously stable notions of status are at risk.

The theme of 'threat' and associated calls to action are common in TEF literature. This is primarily due to the overwhelming focus on the struggle of the academic workforce against increased regulation. More recent accounts and explorations of the 'academic precariat', forced into low-value, insecure conditions have neglected their professional services staff counterparts (Hartung et al. 2017; Loveday 2018). This study has captured the voice of this large part of the HE workforce. Their accounts have exposed the unequal power relations within a stratified professional service. Often 'passive agents' to institutional processes, these staff are not considered to have the agency to enter the 'third space' between professional and academic domains. This becomes self-fulfilling, as whilst 'third space' responsibilities continue to predominately support rather than lead academic activity, they are considered high-status and progressive – often liaising with a wide variety of stakeholders. Only staff with the social and professional capital to engage with such activities will continue to accumulate the necessary currency to re-enter and participate.

These findings further demonstrate that the academic (victim) versus managerial (culprit) dichotomy often referred to in studies regarding regulatory change should be approached critically (Henkel

2005). The interprofessional dynamic between professional services colleagues is clearly far more complex than this dichotomy currently allows with the pressure of external regulation and standards appearing to exacerbate possible dividing lines amongst stakeholders; ultimately rendering relationships of victim and culprit far more nuanced than often discussed. Despite the undoubted re-professionalisation of some professional services staff teams, it was clear that teaching policy and strategy 'belonged' to the academic workforce with academics and researchers positioning anyone too close to regulatory policy as a 'government agent'.

At the same time, our findings show how embedded power within regulatory policy was leveraged effectively by certain participants as a mechanism for coercion, extending specific agendas and expanding the professional services, which reconfigured relationships between different members of staff. Others were inducted into new occupational spaces of policy interpretation and benefited from improved employment conditions, responsibility, and the ability to exercise agency in their professional lives, actively shaping the ways in which the policy was interpreted and enacted.

The 'non-academic' enhancement roles described here show similarities to the 'hybrid' roles highlighted by both Whitchurch (2007) and Oancea (2019) in relation to REF work, and by Watermeyer and Rowe in relation to public engagement professionals. However, our study showed that the creation of these hybridised roles, existing in relatively well-established occupational spaces, led to explicit tensions within the workforce, with those not included feeling excluded from the process of policy interpretation, disempowered and subjugated through regulatory policy implementation. In many ways, these tensions between policy actors in the professional services workforce highlight wider tensions between the creative and constructive forces of regulatory power and subjugation of individuals through regulatory mechanisms (Ball 2011, 2015; Foucault, 1977). In the messy discursive landscapes of the HE workplace, the TEF policy could be seen as having the potential both to free and constrain workers, depending on their positions within the stratified employment structure.

Ball (2015) emphasises the reality of the interpretive process of the 'policy cycle'; how policy is made and remade in and across different contexts. The interpretive nature of the policy cycle was clear in our data, with key policy actors exerting agency in interpreting and leveraging the power of regulatory policy in creative and constructive ways, seeking definitions of excellence and interpreting use of metrics. Through the leveraging of power in this way, and particularly through the creation of hybrid roles, these professional services staff could be considered as subverting existing discursive structures.

However, while this analysis appears to highlight the agency of these key members of the professional services, the reconfiguration of relations within the HE workforce is a highly structured process. While hybrid roles appeared to provide autonomy, space to engage in the TEF policy cycle, and agency to interpret it, that freedom was fundamentally rooted in the policy itself. As such, with regulatory policy as the foundation for these individuals' agency, few would exert that agency in a way that would interpret or remake TEF policy in a disruptive manner, jeopardising that agency.

In other words, the creation of third space roles appeared to carry the power to normalise the neoliberal shift in relationships between universities and the state and the centralised regulation embodied in the TEF. This normalising power (Foucault 1974) hinges on ensuring improved working conditions for those responsible for enacting the policy are fundamentally rooted in the acceptance and perpetuation of the regulatory power of the policy itself. The regulatory power and discursive structures associated with it both enhance and limit the agency of those at the frontline of the policy cycle. This kind of '*structured agency*' highlights the complex relationship between structure (including resource and recognition) and agency on the frontline of regulation.

At the same time, the 'structured agency' embedded in the creation of hybrid TEF-related roles could be seen as creating new structures and discourses that shaped the professional lives of those who were not lucky enough to 'cross over' and instead remained in 'traditional' 'administrative', largely operational roles. These individuals described both exclusion from and subjugation by the TEF policy cycle in their institution, threatened by the new employment structures, increased

stratification, and precarity that these new roles imposed on existing ones. Despite the lack of voice 'traditional administrators' had in TEF enactment, the new professional structures, spurred on by regulatory requirement, only seemed to entrench dominant discourses about the role of professional services staff as 'minions of management', deepening conflict with academic/research staff and further blocking opportunity to meaningfully consult, consider and enhance.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to capture the reality of policy interpretation and implementation 'on the ground' of a research-oriented university in the UK. In highlighting the perspectives and experiences of frontline professional services staff who have been largely neglected in policy literature, findings show the TEF agenda as both 'resetting relationships' whilst being grappled with, often precariously, by individual members of school staff. This analysis has implications for how we think about regulatory policy within HE and more broadly how tensions between structure and agency are manifested in interpretation and implementation of policy and played out between key policy actors in meso-level institutional settings. The concept of 'structured agency', rooted in Ball's work on policy as both text and discourse, provides a useful heuristic device for thinking about the trend within the HE workforce of the growth of third space professionals explicitly linked with different forms of regulatory policy and how these provide normalising power (Foucault 1974) to legitimate increased regulation.

The findings of this work could help those responsible for organisational change to better understand the process of the regulatory policy cycle and the implications of a rapidly developing highly stratified professional services workforce. This has implications for managing both labour force identity and relations and suggests strategic planning of the workforce, rooted in inclusive and transparent discussion or structures, roles, autonomy, and agency, needs to accompany the increasingly demanding regulatory policy cycle.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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