

Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework - response form

The call for evidence is available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/research-excellence-framework-review-call-for-evidence

The closing date for responses is **Thursday 24 March 2016**.

Please return completed forms to:

Hannah Ledger
Research Strategy Unit
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET

Email: REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or release to other parties or to disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes. Please see the consultation document for further information.

If you want information, including personal data, that you provide to be treated as confidential, please explain to us below why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information, we shall take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the department.

I want my response to be treated as confidential ☐

Comments:

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Questions

Name: Professor Martin McQuillan

Email: m.mcquillan@kingston.ac.uk

Address:

PVC for Research & Innovation

Kingston University, River House, 53-57 High Street, Kingston upon Thames KT1 1LQ

Name of Organisation (if applicable): Kingston University

Please check the box that best describes you as a respondent to this consultation

	Respondent type
☐	Alternative higher education provider (with designated courses)
☐	Alternative higher education provider (no designated courses)
☐	Awarding organisation
☐	Business/Employer
☐	Central government
☐	Charity or social enterprise
☐	Further Education College
☒	Higher Education Institution
☐	Individual (Please describe any particular relevant interest; teaching staff, student, etc.)
☐	Legal representative
☐	Local Government
☐	Professional Body
☐	Representative Body
☐	Research Council
☐	Trade union or staff association
☐	Other (please describe)

If you selected 'Individual,' please describe any particular relevant interest; teaching staff, student, etc

Comments: [Click here to enter text.](#)

If you selected 'Other,' please give details

Comments: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Section 1

The primary purpose of the REF is to inform the allocation of quality-related research funding (QR).

1. What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The REF has three stated purposes, of which the allocation of QR funding is only one. The assessment also provides accountability for public investment, producing evidence of the benefits of the investment, as well as providing benchmarking information and reputational yardsticks. Any changes to existing processes must continue to serve all of these purposes.

While the intention to create less burden is welcome, we would not wish this to lead to the use of inappropriate metrics which resulted in a dilution of its rigour and its reputation internationally. Contextualisation of metrics is also essential. There has already been an in-depth study produced on the wider use of metrics which has concluded that it is currently not feasible to assess research outputs or impacts in the REF using quantitative indicators alone, and in the case of impact, that they are no substitute for narrative case studies (James Wilsdon's Metric Tide). A reliance on metrics to assess impact will favour outcomes which can be easily quantified, at the expense of more qualitative but equally valuable effects. It may be difficult in particular to judge the significance of impact using a purely metrics-based approach. We note that 85% of impact in REF2014 was assessed as being of 3* and 4* quality. With the benefit of experience gained from this first exercise, we would expect panels in future to be better equipped to use the full range of evaluation in reaching their decisions.

As far as the assessment of outputs is concerned, while the use of bibliometrics is potentially possible for some STEM disciplines, assuming that the potential disadvantages to those in the early stages of their career can be overcome, the

limited coverage for the arts and the humanities would prevent this being adopted across the board. In effect, peer review would have to be retained for these subject areas. It is difficult to see how running two parallel exercises would contribute to greater efficiency or cost savings. We do acknowledge that there are issues related to peer review in the REF as a consequence of the limited breadth of panels and the overwhelming number of outputs to be assessed by panel members. We would suggest that other models of good practice around the moderation of the grading of outputs, such as that employed by the AHRC, should be explored.

Any introduction of the use of metrics in panels needs to be piloted alongside peer review before a judgement can be made on their fitness for purpose.

Re the definition of impact, it would be helpful to have clarification on what would be considered as eligible impact. We would support the view of the Philosophy sub-panel that *“valuable impact can occur when the contribution made by a researcher arises from their general expertise as a researcher in the field rather than being generated by specific instances of their cutting-edge research..”* (p. 73)

2. If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

One of the primary purposes of the REF is to identify and reward excellence *wherever it is found*, a principle reiterated in the Green Paper, in the Nurse review and in the BIS 2016 grant letter to HEFCE. It enables pockets of excellence within institutions to be recognised and any change which removes the current level of granularity would undermine this fundamental principle. As we stated in our response to the Green Paper, Kingston University is opposed to any simplification which introduces concentration by the back door. The removal of the link between outputs and particular investigators would only be possible if all staff were to be submitted to the REF. The adoption of a whole staff approach would create an unmanageable burden for panels which would then either have to rely on metrics, with all the inherent risks identified above, or result in a sampling approach which would conflict with the principle of identifying excellent research wherever it is found.

An important function of the REF is to provide a picture of the health of disciplines which would be lost in an institutional level assessment. Research assessment needs to be undertaken with due regard for context and disciplinary diversity and there must be a sufficient spread of panels to reflect this diversity or the outcomes will not carry the confidence of the sector. For this reason we do not support a reduction in the number of panels, which was already significantly reduced from 67 to 36 for the 2014 exercise. Indeed, we would suggest that there is a need for the configuration of panels to be reviewed and for some further separation of subjects.

Section 2

While the primary purpose of REF is QR resource allocation, data collected through the REF and results of REF assessments can also inform disciplinary, institutional and UK-wide decision making.

3. What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

Insofar as it provides external benchmarking info, the REF provides an evidence base for the health of disciplines over the period and a predictor of future performance. The information gathered through the REF process and the outcomes are put to multiple uses. It underpins decisions on internal resource allocation and on priorities for strategic investment to ensure sustainability in areas of recognised excellence and to support emerging areas of strength; it informs our staffing strategy and determines the allocation of HEFCE research capital, which is targeted to support to world class research. The reputational benefits are vital in attracting talented staff and students. The recognition in international league tables is also a driver for postgraduate recruitment and undergraduate sponsorship opportunities. A strong REF outcome facilitates the fostering of collaborations with businesses and prestigious bodies attracted by quality research which has been robustly validated.

It is additional to, and is used alongside, other internally generated management information.

4. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The data collection process for the REF was streamlined for the 2014 exercise through the use of HESA data for external research income and completions. Further data collection would be an additional burden and its benefits would have to be weighed against the costs to determine if it provides any meaningful information not already available through existing HESA or other sources.

Section 3

The incentive effects of the REF shape academic behaviour, such as through the introduction of the impact criteria.

5. How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The assessment of impact within the REF has gone some way to promoting collaborations between universities and the wider world. As stated above, a strong REF outcome in itself makes the research unit/grouping attractive to potential collaborators from the business world and from other sectors.

Attempts to broaden the scope of the exercise will add to the complexity and burden. The REF should not be the only means of distributing public funding to support these aims; other mechanisms (e.g. HEIF, Innovate funding) should also be used to achieve some of these objectives.

Section 4

Previous studies have focused on the costs of REF with respect to the time and resources needed for the submission and assessment processes. The Review is also interested in views and any associated evidence that the REF influences, positively or negatively, the research and career choices of individuals, or the development of academic disciplines. It is also interested in views on how it might encourage institutions to 'game-play' and thereby limit the aggregate value of the exercise.

6. In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and / or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g. success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming the system?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The REF has had a clear effect on how researchers and research leaders approach impact. It has driven a shift towards embracing and valuing impact. There is greater ambition to achieve impacts that are national or international in scale, rather than merely local, and a stronger drive towards achieving concrete, identifiable benefits for clearly defined people or organisations, rather than a more diffuse research dissemination approach. The next cycle of assessment is already driving further changes in academic behaviour through the requirements for open access and, potentially, the use of ORCID identifiers.

The most commonly cited example of gaming in the system relates to the "transfer market" just before the submission deadline, when staff are bought in to boost a submission. We would argue that some churn of this nature is healthy. The REF has helped to create a dynamic job market in the UK and to drive productivity and performance. It has served to attract the best and brightest talent from around the world to the UK.

It should also be recognised that some of the alternative approaches to assessment being proposed can also create gaming. This is the case with some metrics such as journal impact factors and citation counts. Similarly, the adoption of a whole staff assessment approach could also act as an incentive for HEIs to transfer staff to teaching-only contracts to avoid them being eligible for submission.

7. In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The REF provides a set of criteria for research excellence which are useful benchmarks for HEIs to use in seeking to improve performance. It enables HEIs to identify areas of strength within subject areas which can be the focus for further development.

It would be a positive change for a Unit to be able to earn credit for its role as a training ground for ECRs who have moved on to other institutions. It would also be useful to consider the ways in which the REF discourages diversity and what measures can be taken to ensure that credit is given to the full range of disciplinary activity, not just the mainstream. The introduction of metrics would exacerbate this problem and limit the horizons of discovery in UK science.

Section 5

Much of REF focuses on the retrospective analysis of success achieved by institutions either through output or impact. Yet the resources provided anticipate continued success based on that track record. Are there means of better addressing forward-looking institutional plans and priorities, and how these might feed in to national policy?

8. How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The REF, and the QR funding derived from the exercise, does reward past performance, but the potential disadvantages of this are mitigated by the fact that the REF is held at sufficiently regular intervals of 5 to 6 years to avoid ossification in the system. Within the environment element, there is some scope for units to gain recognition for their future strategic aims for research, including the main objectives and activities in research for the coming 5-year period, identification of new and developing initiatives of strategic importance and of priority developmental areas for the unit. While one possible solution might be to increase the weighting of this element, there may be a risk that units are rewarded for the quality of the narrative rather than on actual performance, which may never materialise. The University also considers that the suggestion in the Government's Green Paper for a metrics based mini-REF every two to three years to refresh the results and capture emerging pockets of research excellence will add to the burden of assessment with little benefit, as the research landscape is unlikely to change significantly in that timeframe. The current assessment period is an accurate reflection of the life of a PhD cohort, which is a good indicator of the health of a research unit. It also reflects the timescale of large grants and the outcomes from them. The outcome of a purely metrics based exercise is unlikely to have the confidence of the sector, nor of external stakeholders nationally and internationally.

Final thoughts

The Review is keen to hear of creative ideas and insights and to be open in its approach.

9. Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

While the REF methodology is not without shortcomings, it has been developed to cover a range of disciplines from the hard sciences through to the performing and creative arts. As such, it gives confidence in a uniform model for the assessment of research quality which promotes fairness in the system. We would not welcome a multi-tiered approach which assessed disciplines in different ways

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge receipt of individual responses unless you tick the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply ☐