

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:

Questions

Name: Jamie Arrowsmith

Email: Jamie.Arrowsmith@universitiesuk.ac.uk

Address:

Universities UK
Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London
WC1H 9HQ

Name of Organisation (if applicable): Universities UK

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)

About Universities UK

Universities UK is the representative organisation for the UK's universities. Founded in 1918, its mission is to be the voice for universities in the UK, providing high quality leadership and support to its members to promote a successful and diverse higher education sector. With 132 members and offices in London, Cardiff (Universities Wales) and Edinburgh (Universities Scotland), it promotes the strength and success of UK universities nationally and internationally.

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

Comments:

If you selected 'Other,' please give details

Comments:

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 financial and administrative burden of REF should be seen in a cost-benefit perspective. The costs of REF 2014 – though high relative to RAE 2008– correspond to only about 2.4% of the total funding allocations informed by its outcomes over a 6-year period¹. At the same time, there are a number of largely unmeasurable indirect costs associated with the exercise, such as people “transferring” between institutions. It is therefore very difficult to measure properly the costs and benefits, although many would argue they are broadly proportionate in terms of the broad benefits associated with the exercise.

Priority for reform should be given to ways that can reduce the burden on the academic community tasked with undertaking the exercise. Reform should also focus on refining and improving the framework that is currently in place and which has been iteratively developed through consultation and engagement with the research community over many years. Any fundamental changes to the form, structure and focus of the REF risks incurring significant transition costs, and loss of the confidence of the research community. We therefore support improvement and refinement of the current framework rather than a fundamental departure. As noted above, a priority should be to reduce the burden on the academic community. .

General: The current weighting between outputs, impact and environment should be retained. The purpose of the REF should continue to be focussed on identifying excellent research with impact, with the balance weighted towards outputs. However, there is the potential to increase the emphasis on impact which is set out below.

Clarity, timely communication and continuity in the definition and evaluation and reporting mechanisms should be prioritised. This is particularly important for how REF defines impact - universities invested significantly in new processes, people and infrastructure in response to the

¹ Technopolis (2015) REF Accountability Review: Costs, benefits and burden, report to the four UK higher education funding councils

significant changes between RAE2008 and REF2014, which represents ‘sunk’ costs in the research infrastructure.

By assuring a large degree of consistency between the current and future exercises, the costs of future iterations will be restrained as it gives the system time to absorb the significant one-off investments required, for example, by the introduction of the impact sub-profile and changes in the Unit of Assessment structure (both of which significantly contributed to the rise in costs of REF 2014 compared to RAE 2008).

Outputs: There should be an unequivocal commitment to peer review as underpinning quality judgments in the next iterations of the REF. This underpins the rigour and credibility of the exercise within and outside the higher education sector; however, steps should be taken to ensure that the transparency and consistency demanded by the REF process are fully implemented.

On balance, we are in favour of retaining the selective approach to the REF. This provides discretion for universities to make strategic decisions regarding their research profile. While requiring submission of 100% of research staff (or a minimum proportion) has many merits, not least eliminating the reduction in morale amongst those not submitted, this could undermine the ability of some institutions to develop capability and capacity, and nurture pockets of excellence that are important to the overall health, diversity and vitality of the research base. On the other hand, a 100% submission with an associated move of other staff to teaching led contracts could encourage the development of teaching led careers. However, one mechanism to encourage institutions to increase their overall rates of submission would be to include a measure of intensity at the census date as one of the quantitative metrics used to inform judgements about the research environment.

While there is a role for using metrics to support quality judgments, this role can only be supplementary in nature. The judgement of James Wilsdon’s report *The Metric Tide* is sound, and the potential for metrics to consistently replace quality judgments across all discipline areas is limited; significant issues remain. The use of proprietary metrics at any stage of the process should be avoided wherever this is possible; ‘open’ metrics and data are the only acceptable measures in the long term. The potential and efficacy of metrics continues to evolve and their use as a research assessment tool should be periodically reviewed. Any new research assessment system should also be flexible enough to respond to new and evolving approaches.

Impact: The assessment and reporting of impact should remain predominantly qualitative. As shown by HEFCE-commissioned research into the case study database², it is unlikely that robust metrics could be developed in this area, and most certainly not in time for the next exercise. There

² King’s College London and Digital Science (2015) The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact, report to the four UK higher education funding councils

may however be benefits in merging the impact template into the environment template to reduce burden and better reflect institutional strategy formulation mechanisms, recognising that there is a critical link between research strategies, support for researchers and eventual impact of research. In doing so, and retaining the current weighting for impact (20%) within the overall equation, the relative value of impact case studies would be enhanced.

An agreed template for impact case studies would certainly be welcomed, as would greater clarity and guidance on the use of quantitative data. However, it is critical that 'impact' continues to be conceived of in broad terms, recognising the diverse ways in which research can positively affect and influence all areas of public, social and economic life. We are aware of some concerns in the humanities and social sciences of significant impact related to an individual's overall research profile and experience, which can be difficult to link specifically to a research output – yet have profound influence. We would welcome the opportunity to explore any future evolution of the definition to ensure that the richness and variety of research impact is fully captured.

Environment: We suggest that the environment template should be reviewed to place an emphasis on institutional-level support for research and the overarching strategic objectives. This would consist of three elements:

- An *institutional-level research environment statement*, which would set out details of the overarching research strategy within which all research is undertaken, and referencing support for key initiatives and government agendas such as asset-sharing, collaboration, open access and open data, research integrity and equality and diversity
- An *institutional-level impact statement*, setting out how the institution seeks to support and facilitate impact
- A *Unit of Assessment-level summary of key data*, including data on PGR completions, research income and (as noted above) overall submission rates for the UoA, accompanied by a succinct contextualising narrative. Precise data requirements could be agreed at Main Panel level.

This would help to set UoA level data in the context of wider institutional objectives, and provide greater coherence between UoA and institutional strategies. It may also help to reduce duplication and burden, as the institutional-level research environment and impact statements would only need to be produced once, centrally. In addition there needs to be much more clarity at UoA level on the criteria for success.

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:

Units of Assessment: A Unit of Assessment-based structure upholds the REF's aim to reward excellence wherever it is found and enable recognition of research strengths and islands of excellence, whilst providing an incentive for institutional-level strategic decision making and ensuring sufficient expertise and breadth of experience are available on the panels – it is therefore instrumental to both the role of REF as a method of allocating QR, and as a benchmarking tool for HEIs across the UK. This structure is also seen as increasing the transparency and accountability of the allocation method for QR funding.

Universities value the granularity of feedback received from the assessment, as reflected by the occurrence of multiple submissions under a single UoAs. Such granular-level performance information is also valuable for both universities and other stakeholders (such as government and funders) in that it helps to:

- monitor the health and vitality of research areas
- recognise the impact of investments in specific research areas
- identify potential challenges to the diversity of the research base
- developing research norms and expectations at the discipline level
- helping academic leaders better understand and manage disciplinary differences

We believe that the REF has achieved a reasonable balance between size of a UoA, rigour of peer review and manageability of the panel's workloads. Further aggregation of UoAs may create greater scope for the use of metrics, but with significant and undesirable trade-offs in terms of granularity of the feedback received and the scale at which HEIs can benchmark themselves against one another; islands of excellence risk being 'lost in the noise'. This would negatively impact the REF's ability to recognise and reward islands of excellence and serve as a benchmarking tool.

At the same time, there are concerns around how a discipline-based assessment structure shapes incentives for interdisciplinary research (IDR), and whether it provides the breadth of expertise required to adequately assess IDR outputs. We recognise that a flexible/dynamic UoA structure is important for addressing these limitations. On balance, however, given the substantial value of UoA-level information and the scale of changes introduced in REF 2014's UoA structure compared to RAE 2008, it seems appropriate to provide the system with certainty and stability by maintain the current set up.

Reporting at more aggregated levels: Impact and environment should continue to be reported at UoA level to match how the related strategies are formulated and implemented within HEIs (usually at the faculty level). However, in the environment section – and as noted above - there could be scope for reporting on specific aspects of impact and environment at the institutional level to help reduce duplication.

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:

The REF exercise is an independent indicator of research performance at (broadly speaking) discipline level. As such, it is valuable to institutions as an internal and external benchmarking tool to assess research strengths. This information regularly informs research strategy formulation, investment and staffing decisions, and the assessment of whether specific growth/improvement targets in institutions' research strategies have been met.

Therefore, rather than duplicating management information, REF outcomes provide institutions with a good basis on which to build key performance indicators and are therefore largely complementary. Whilst there may have been duplications in the past, universities now have a strong incentive (also driven by the cost of participating in REF) to minimise this by collecting information that can both feed into the REF process and support strategic management. Often this REF information is simply internal information presented in a specific way. Institutions indicate that REF information sometimes – but not always – takes priority on other information in matters relating to research quality.

Some universities report that in absence of REF, they would still carry out something similar to the mock exercises typically undertaken in preparation for the REF (and which are a major driver of REF costs), as much of the REF-focussed preparation is viewed as a part of good research governance and not a bolt-on driven by the administrative requirements of the exercise. Impact case studies also act as a repository of good practice in this area and help inform future approaches to furthering non-academic impact.

There may be scope for taking greater advantage of the granularity of REF for benchmarking purposes by making outcomes publically available at sub-UoA level (as this information is already produced, but only published in aggregated form). Institutions would also find it useful to be provided with more detailed feedback on the impact dimension.

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 quantity and type of performance information already collected by REF seems about right to enable both government and HEIs to make funding and investment decisions based on excellence and productivity. This is reflected in the world-leading performance on the UK research base on both research quality (including growth in quality seen between the last two assessments) and cost-effectiveness. This is also reflected in the extent to which REF shapes HEIs' priorities and the values of the research community (eg on impact).

Rather than significantly expanding or changing the information collected by REF, it would be useful to make all of the very granular feedback publically available, so that users can make the most of it. Nonetheless, the review might consider whether it would be helpful to add information on dimensions of research quality and productivity on which the UK currently excels but are not currently captured in REF at present – for instance, international collaboration. This information and its definition/collection should, however, be aligned to the relevant existing data sources to avoid generating additional burden.

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:

Universities UK believes that appropriate incentives are already in place for the constructive and creative behaviours mentioned – either because these are driven by competitive forces in the global/national research context (for example, growing emphasis on solving societal challenges, which encourages collaboration and interdisciplinary research), or because current incentives (such as EU-wide funding programmes and policies) and changes between RAE 2008 and REF 2014 (notably changes to UoA structure) have proven effective in further encouraging them.

However, a revised and enhanced environment template (including better use of quantitative information and inclusion of impact template) could provide some scope for government to monitor progress on relevant strategic aims and encourage institutions to report on specific behaviours promoted by government policy. An environment template with a focus on institutional-level strategy could also help to place an emphasis on how institutions support key government agendas such as:

- Open access and open data
- Research integrity
- Collaboration and asset-sharing
- Equality and diversity
- Support for researcher career development

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:

While comparability between exercises is limited due to changes in the assessment processes, it is widely felt within the HE sector that REF is in part responsible for the evident improvement in the overall quality of research in the UK since 1986. Positive outcomes that have been linked to the REF process include:

- encouraging individual researchers to strive for the highest quality of publications (ie prioritising excellence over volume)
- raising the level and quality of research planning
- helping embed positive behaviours in the research community in areas such as impact, collaboration, and PGR training
- encouraging universities to invest in the recruitment and retention of research talent
- encouraging universities to better coordinate and synchronise their strategy and delivery plans around research activities

The REF may have other less positive impacts on researchers and the research ecosystem. How far these behaviours are uniquely driven by the REF – as opposed to the broader features of a highly competitive research environment – is debatable. For instance, the administrative burden of demand management that has been transferred on to institutions in an effort to reduce research council costs is challenging for institutions (and somewhat opaque in terms of the size of the total burden, unlike the institutional costs of the REF) while low success rates in competitive funding are widely known to have a negative, pervasive impact on researcher morale. In a highly geared, high-quality research system which receives lower levels of public investment than comparable economies, competition will always be considerable. However, the success of the UK in, for example, securing European Research Council funding, suggests that the system has provided the UK with the capabilities to be successful on a global scale.

One of the less desirable behaviours noted revolves around the staff selection processes, which is often raised as one of the main ‘gaming’ issues encouraged by REF and a chief source of contention. Selective submission reduces comparability of outcomes and means that the REF provides an incomplete account of research capacity. However, it does recognise that institutions have a wide range of missions and capabilities, provides a mechanism for rewarding strategic development of research excellence and capability, and enables institutions to develop a broader field of researchers – and research-engaged teaching staff – than are submitted to the exercise. It should be recalled that the REF is a process to identify (and reward) excellence – not an audit of the whole output of the research base.

Mandating 100% submission of research-active staff (or a lower but fixed proportion, to minimise burden) could help address this issue, but should not be seen as a panacea. Whilst gaming may be reduced, it could lead to unintended consequences whereby although the counterweight of encouraging careers for teaching led staff would be a benefit, significant proportions of staff are moved into teaching-only contracts; and may undermine the breadth, depth and vitality of the research base by making it more difficult for institutions to support emerging researchers. It is also unlikely to lead to a lower cost and administrative burden without a whole-sale revision of the assessment methodology, as the number of outputs would necessarily rise without the introduction of alternatives such as sampling. Universities UK would welcome further opportunities to discuss how these challenges could be addressed should such a position be followed.

As shown by HEFCE-commissioned analysis undertaken by RAND³, the impact case study thresholds (based on staff volumes) have also had an unintended impact on HEIs submission behaviour. It would be preferable to modify this approach to determining the number of case studies to be submitted, or to apply it at a more aggregate level (a concurrent reduction of the number of case studies required per staff submitted would also help reduce burden).

³ RAND (2015) Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation, report to the four UK higher education funding councils

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 impact of REF on the development of disciplines has sometimes been positive, as it has in some cases enabled institutions to play to their research strengths, develop new ones and benchmark them against the sector. On the other hand, there are concerns around the perceived influence of a discipline-based assessment structure like the REF's on some interdisciplinary research areas (eg museum studies), and how this may impact researchers' career choices and pathways.

On teaching, institutions note that recruitment of REF research 'stars' can expand and improve opportunities for research-based learning, which adds to the student experience. This can somewhat be mitigated by the fact that high REF performers are usually assigned lower teaching workloads in order for them to focus on producing quality research. However:

- It is unclear that this would not occur in the absence of REF, given the strong level of national and international competition which research departments are subject to. It is rational for HEIs to enabling their most talented researchers to spend significant time on what they do best.
- The introduction of TEF, if properly designed, can further help ensure that teaching and research both receive the appropriate strategic emphasis and staff/capital resource.
- By contrast, organisational and funding separation of teaching and research (as laid out in the 2015 higher education green paper proposals) are only likely to exacerbate trade-offs, discourage research-informed teaching and reduce opportunities for research-based learning.

Some institutions believe that the restructuring of UoAs implemented in REF 2014 has had mixed effects (encouraged interdisciplinarity in some research areas, resulted in the distinctiveness of some specialisms to be lost in others), but looking at the future the majority would prefer no changes to allow this system to bed.

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 is a retrospective assessment exercise by design and not by accident – this makes it consistent but also highly complementary with the peer-reviewed, prospective and politically independent assessment of research proposals which informs the competitive allocation of Research Councils funding. The census period is short enough to be a good indicator of current and future research health. The resource provided do not ‘anticipate’ but rather ‘enable’ continued success based on track record. That QR funding should remain stable over a set period of time is a necessary prerequisite of research excellence.

It is unclear how success on these forward-looking elements could be judged in absolute terms (as it is already difficult to do this retrospectively), and how this would impact the autonomy and planning behaviour of institutions. These aspects should therefore be evaluated as part of the environment template where appropriate. This would help mitigate the risk of making the process less robust by mixing input-based indicators into a process strongly oriented towards output measures.

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:

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 ☐

IND/16/1a