

# Building on Success and Learning from Experience: An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework

## Introduction

In November 2015, the Government asked Lord Nicholas Stern, President of the British Academy, to lead an independent review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The purpose of the review is to examine how university research funding can be allocated more efficiently, offer greater reward for excellent research, and reduce the administrative burden so that UK universities can continue to be world leaders in research.

The review was guided by a Steering Group, a Call for Evidence, which received 301 responses, and 40 interviews with universities and research users. The Council's response to the Call for Evidence can be downloaded [here](#).

The final report, 'Building on Success and Learning from Experience: An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework', can be downloaded [here](#).

## Recommendations

The report has a total of 12 recommendations, these are summarised in the table below (pages 2-5).

## Next steps

The Government has committed to hold the next REF by 2021. In order to fulfil this ambition, the review has proposed the following timetable (p32):

Summer and autumn 2016: the UK Governments and funding councils should work together to translate the principles outlined in the report. Work will be needed to test out the impact of the proposals and to mitigate risks. Work also might be required to model or pilot some of the proposals.

End of 2016: a formal consultation on the proposals, with decisions published by summer 2017.

## Lord Stern's Review of REF

### Purpose

This briefing sets out the key points from the independent review of the Research Excellence Framework, led by Lord Stern.

### Relevance

The recommendations are relevant to members across the UK.

### Publication date

28 July 2016

### Contact details for further information

[Rachel Craine](#), Senior Policy Officer

Recommendations	Further Details
<b>Staff Selection and outputs</b>	
<p><b>Recommendations 1:</b> All research active staff should be returned to the REF.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The report suggests recommendation 1 will help overcome some of the long-term consequences to individuals who are not returned to the REF (para 64).</li> <li>A common dataset would support the accurate description of university research and teaching staff assessed in the REF and the TEF (para 65).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 2:</b> Outputs should be submitted at Unit of Assessment level with a set average number per FTE but with flexibility for some faculty members to submit more and others less than the average.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The report recommends outputs are collated at Unit of Assessment (UoA) level. A future REF would 'prescribe maximum and minimum levels on the number of outputs that can be submitted for each individual submitted to a UoA' (para 66).</li> <li>The number of outputs to be submitted by individuals in the next REF should vary, the report suggests this could be between zero and six (para 67).</li> <li>The total number of outputs per UoA should be adjusted so the outputs to be assessed in the next exercise are not significantly higher than the total reviewed in REF2014. The report suggests further modelling will need to be undertaken on this, together with consultation with HESA on data issues (para 70).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 3:</b> Outputs should not be portable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A key recommendation is that outputs should be submitted only by the institutions where the output is 'demonstrably generated' (para 73). Staff recruited during the REF cycle would be able to be included, but they would only be able to include outputs that have been accepted for publication after joining the HEI. The review says 'disincentivising short-term and narrowly-motivated movement across the sector, whilst still incentivising long-term investment in people will benefit UK research and should also encourage greater collaboration across the system' (para 74).</li> </ul>

## Assessment of outputs

<p><b>Recommendation 4:</b> Panels should continue to assess on the basis of peer review. However, metrics should be provided to support panel members in their assessment, and panels should be transparent about their use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The review supports the 'appropriate' use of bibliometric data in helping panels in their peer review assessment, and recommends that all panels be given comparable data to support them in making their judgements (para 76).</li> </ul>
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## Impact

<p><b>Recommendation 5:</b> Institutions should be given more flexibility to showcase their interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts by submitting 'institutional' level impact case studies, part of a new institutional level assessment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HEIs should have more flexibility over how many case studies to submit from each Unit of Assessment (UoA). This would 'allow them to demonstrate their strengths more effectively, and make it easier to submit interdisciplinary case studies'. (para. 78).</li> <li>The funding bodies should determine the number of case studies required from each HEI and UoA. To reduce the cost and burden of the next REF the report recommends that the number of case studies for the next exercise should not be significantly higher than was required for REF2014 (para 79).</li> <li>HEIs should submit a minimum of one impact case study in each UoA (down from two in REF2014) (para 80).</li> <li>HEIs should be given a 'modest amount' of flexibility to vary which UoA case studies are submitted to – between 10 and 20% of their total submissions (para 80).</li> <li>All institutions submitting to the REF should be required to submit some 'institutional' level case studies from multi-and inter-disciplinary, and collaborative work (para 80).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 6:</b> Impact must be based on research of demonstrable quality. However, case studies could be linked to a research activity and a body of work as well as to a broad range of research outputs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The report expresses concern that 'the mechanistic linkages made in REF2014 between specific outputs and eventual (often very specific) impact unduly restricted the ability of institutions to submit examples of where an individual or group's research and expertise had led to impact, but where that impact could not sensibly be traced back specifically to particular research outputs' (para 81).</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For this reason, it recommends that 'options are explored for linking case studies to research activity and a body of work, as well as to a broad range of research outputs' (para 81).</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 7:</b> Guidance on the REF should make it clear that impact case studies should not be narrowly interpreted, need not solely focus on socio-economic impacts but should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and impacts on teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The report calls for a 'broadening and deepening' of the definition of impact and to emphasise the impact on 'public engagement and understanding' and cultural life. It also recommends better alignment of the REF with the TEF through inclusion of research that leads to 'major impact on curricula and/or pedagogy, and research that leads to the creation of new disciplines (para 84).</li> </ul>
<b>Environment</b>	
<b>Recommendation 8:</b> A new, institutional level Environment assessment should include an account of the institution's future research environment strategy, a statement of how it supports high quality research and research-related activities, including its support for interdisciplinary and cross-institutional initiatives and impact. It should form part of the institutional assessment and should be assessed by a specialist, cross-disciplinary panel.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Institutions which have a 'dynamic and creative research environment, a vision and direction for their research..., and a plan to deliver impact' should be rewarded (para 85).</li> <li>There should be an institutional-level environment statement which would provide 'a more holistic view of the HEI, allowing the REF to capture institution-wide strategic objectives and cross-cutting structures and initiatives' (para 90).</li> <li>Assessment of institutional level submissions for environment and impact should be made by a 'separate, cross-disciplinary panel'. Funding bodies should determine how funding should be apportioned, but it is suggested that the quality profiles at UoA level continue and a share of QR funding should be awarded based on HEI Institutional Environment statement and the institutional-level impact. The report recommends that the funding bodies pilot the institutional level assessment (para 91).</li> <li>The purpose of an Environment statement at UoA level would be: identify and reward excellence; enable sub-panels to understand the 'health and future of their disciplines'; and to enable metrics on research intensity to be 'appropriately contextualized and assessed at a disciplinary level' (para 92).</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation 9:</b> That individual Unit of Assessment environment statements are condensed, made complementary to the institutional level environment statement and include those key metrics on research intensity specific to the Unit of Assessment.	

## Wider context

<p><b>Recommendation 10:</b> Where possible, REF data and metrics should be open, standardised and combinable with other research funders' data collection processes in order to streamline data collection requirements and reduce the cost of compiling and submitting information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weighting for outputs in the REF should stay at 65%, and impact should not account for less than 20% in the next exercise (paras. 95 &amp; 97).</li> <li>• Data infrastructure is beyond the scope of this review (para 105). Work is needed to break down barriers between systems, streamline data collection and improve quality and transparency of data sources. The UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics, should have a role in addressing some of these issues (para 106).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 11:</b> That Government, and UKRI, could make more strategic use of REF, to better understand the health of the UK research base, our research resources and areas of high potential for future development, and to build the case for strong investment in research in the UK.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future exercise panels should be supported 'more strongly by external evidence in delivering a robust grading of their discipline, to ensure funders can understand and support the health of disciplines' (para 109).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 12:</b> Government should ensure that there is no increased administrative burden to Higher Education Institutions from interactions between the TEF and REF, and that they together strengthen the vital relationship between teaching and research in HEIs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The report suggests building a common dataset that can 'describe university research and teaching staff' (para 111).</li> </ul>