

# CoDH Briefing: The second Research Excellence Framework

## Introduction

The Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) was largely supportive of the REF and concluded that it had been successful in helping to promote excellence and drive up the quality of UK research. The Review considered areas for improvement within the framework and the report set out 12 interdependent recommendations which it stated must be implemented together in order to be successful.

The four UK higher education funding bodies are now consulting on the second REF, and have set out their plans for implementing the Stern recommendations. The overall aim is to maintain continuity with the previous REF, although a number of changes are under consideration in light of the review.

## Key findings from the Stern Review

The review identified a number of issues with the framework used in 2014. These are summarised below.

- **Cost.** The REF accountability review estimated that the total cost to the UK of running REF 2014 was £246m, an increase of 133% from the RAE 2008. £14m of those costs were for the four UK higher education funding bodies, and £19m for the panellists' time. The large majority (£212m) was borne by the HE community in preparing submissions, including £55m for the impact element.
- **Scope for 'gaming'.** Tactics designed to maximise REF performance may not be harmonious with fostering quality research and staff development in the longer term. Much 'gaming' behaviour was linked to the hiring of staff to enhance REF returns.
- **Selectivity.** Many of the costs of the REF for institutions relate to the need to select individuals who can return four high-quality outputs, or in documenting individual circumstances. Measures to promote equality and diversity are vital. HEFCE analysis showed a difference between the rate of selection for men and women and for black, Asian UK and non-EU nationals and staff with declared disabilities.

## Implementing the Stern Review

**Purpose:** This briefing provides a summary of the findings and recommendations from the Stern Review of the REF, and sets out the HE funding bodies' proposals for implementing them. CoDH will submit a response.

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**Relevance for CoDH members:** The REF will govern the distribution of research funding through UKRI

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- **Peer review.** Responses to the review reiterated the importance of peer review. With the exception of some sub-disciplines, metrics capture only some dimensions of output quality. There is a therefore a trade-off between considering a larger volume of outputs for each unit to provide more accurate benchmarking information, and the accuracy of an exercise based solely on peer review.
- **Effects on research.** The review signalled that desire to be included in the REF could strongly influence academics in their choices about what problems to tackle. This can drive a reluctance to engage in risky or multidisciplinary projects and may be discouraging innovative thinking and risk taking.
- **Interdisciplinary approaches and collaboration** can enhance both the academic and socioeconomic creativity and impact of research. There was a sense that interdisciplinary work was disadvantaged by the current REF through the disciplinary 'silos' embodied in the Unit of Assessment panel structures.

**Effects on careers.** The requirement to return a set number of outputs per individual may encourage a focus on 'safer' publication strategies and lead to the tying of research quality too closely with individual performance rather than team-based activity.

- **Capturing the research environment** There is scope for the environment statement to be simplified. There is a degree of duplication in HEIs' submissions to different units of assessment because of strategies which apply across institutions. Conversely, environment statements representing the different units of assessment sometimes struggle to capture institution-wide strategies based around research themes. It is generally felt that environment statements might be better suited to using metrics.
- **Impact.** The new impact section was felt to be important, however there were a range of issues around burden, freedom to adapt impact strategies to different units, collaboration and jointly produced research, and the need to capture the impact on teaching.
- **Periodicity and dynamism.** Extending the interval between exercises would allow the costs to be spread over a longer period; however, the accuracy of the exercise decreases over the time elapsed since the census date.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the Review, the report makes 12 recommendations which should be considered interdependent in the sense that the efficacy of one depends on the others also being implemented. These are high level recommendations intended to provide a sense of direction and set of clear principles to underpin the development of the next iteration of the REF.

The recommendations align with the areas of inquiry considered by the review and are set out below.

### Outputs

- Recommendation 1: All research active staff should be returned in the REF
- Recommendation 2: 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
- Recommendation 3: Outputs should not be portable
- Recommendation 4: 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.

### Impact

- Recommendation 5: 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
- Recommendation 6: 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
- Recommendation 7: 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.

### Environment

- Recommendation 8: 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

- Recommendation 9: 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

- Recommendation 10: 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
- Recommendation 11: 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
- Recommendation 12: 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.

### **Consultation on the second REF**

The UK higher education funding bodies are now consulting on proposed changes to the REF in light of this review, which will come into effect for the REF 2021 exercise. There are 44 consultation questions, some of which will be of particular relevance to our professions. CoDH invites your views on the proposals to help inform our response.

The overarching intention of the proposals is to maintain continuity with the previous REF, although a number of changes are under consideration in light of the review. REF 2021 will aim to support consistency and balance workload across panels and to encourage the submission of interdisciplinary research.

The consultation seeks comments on a number of specific areas and proposals, which are set out below.

#### **Expert panels**

The REF exercise will continue to be based on expert review. To improve consistency, the consultation proposes to develop the submissions guidance and assessment criteria in parallel, in collaboration with the main panels. The sub-panel members and assessors would then be appointed later in the exercise, near the start of the assessment year.

The document also includes proposals for improving the representativeness of panels in relation to equality and diversity, with the potential to open up the nominations process which has previously been limited to specific invited bodies, of which CoDH is one. This would allow

individual HEIs to nominate panellists and for individuals to put themselves forward.

### **Staff**

A key proposal is that all research-active staff should be returned to the REF in line with Lord Stern's recommendation. In order to minimise the possibility of HEIs assigning staff 'strategically' it proposes using HESA cost centres to assign staff to UOAs. Comments are also invited on potential issues surrounding the proposed definition of 'research-active' staff.

The minimum and maximum number of outputs per returned member of staff are under review, with the intention to 'decouple' individual staff from outputs submitted. This could result in there being no minimum number of outputs per individual staff member, meaning some staff may be submitted with zero outputs. 'Portability' of outputs would be removed under the proposals to avoid institutions losing the benefit of work they have supported when a member of staff moves elsewhere.

The consultation further proposes to remove category C staff from those eligible for submission. Deans may wish to consider questions 12-14 of the consultation and the potential impact on their institutions from excluding these staff.

### **Collaboration**

The consultation invites comments on how better to support collaboration between academia and organisations outside higher education in REF 2021.

### **Outputs**

The criteria for assessing research outputs in REF 2021 are not expected to change significantly from the previous exercise. This includes an intention to better recognise interdisciplinary research through a range of possible measures, including the appointment of 'interdisciplinary champions'.

### **Impact and environment**

Based on the successful introduction of the impact element in REF 2014, the consultation proposes to maintain consistency as far as possible, with specific changes proposed in the following areas:

- Impact will be captured within the environment element of the assessment, based upon impact case studies meaning the impact template will no longer be required.
- To avoid increasing the burden of submission, the minimum number of case studies may be reduced to one. Institutional-level impact case studies may also be required drawing on multi- and interdisciplinary and collaborative work.
- Case studies will be submitted via a web form which will include a number of mandatory fields in order to standardise submissions.
- Case studies will be admissible based on research activity for example, as well as specific outputs, to enable a richer picture of the impact of research.

- Ground-breaking academic impacts such as research leading to the creation of new disciplines will be assessed through the output or environment element of the REF.
- Impacts will continue to be submitted by the institution(s) in which the underpinning research has been conducted to avoid undermining institutions' strategies for enabling impact.

The environment template will be more structured in REF 2021, and will incorporate more quantitative data. This would allow a more deregulated approach to this element.

### Institutional-level assessment

An institutional assessment panel will undertake assessment of impact and environment at institutional level. All institutions will be required to submit some institutional-level impact case studies to showcase interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts, and an institutional-level environment statement to complement the statement provided at submission level. The move to institutional-level assessment will require changes to the weightings of different elements of the assessment, and comments are sought on proposed adjustments to weightings.

### Timetable

The proposed timetable for REF 2021 is as follows [Table © HEFCE 2016]

**Table 1: Proposed indicative timetable for REF 2021**

1 August 2013	Start of period for income and impacts
1 January 2014	Start of period for outputs
Noon on Friday 17 March 2017	Consultation deadline
Mid-2017	Publish initial decisions on the next REF
Mid-2017	Appoint panel chairs
2018	Publish guidance on submissions and panel criteria
2019	Invite HEIs to make submissions
31 July 2020	End of assessment period (for research impacts, the research environment and related data)
November 2020	Closing date for submissions
31 December 2020	End of publication period for publication of research outputs and outputs underpinning impact case studies
2021	Assessment year
December 2021	Publication of outcomes
Spring 2022	Publication of submissions and reports

## **CoDH approach**

We are planning a programme of extensive engagement with our members to develop our response to this consultation, working closely with our research advisory group and seeking input from the wider membership.

As we develop our response our key concern will be to ensure that the changes do not introduce elements that may be detrimental to our professions, while ensuring that positive aspects of the REF 2014 are maintained, and that the opportunity is taken to resolve problematic elements of the previous approach. We are keen to see a REF that appropriately recognises, demonstrates and rewards excellence in nursing, midwifery and allied health professional research across our institutions.

We will be discussing the Council's response to the REF consultation at the 2017 AGM in January and intend to circulate a draft response to all members for feedback in February. The closing date for submission is 17 March 2017.

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