



LORD STERN'S REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK: Response from the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Learned Society of Wales

Introduction

- 1 As the national academies of Scotland and of Wales, the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) and the Learned Society of Wales (LSW) welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This response was prepared using the expertise of a Working Group of Fellows, representing both the RSE and the LSW, from a wide range of institutions and with diverse backgrounds. Both academies span the full range of disciplines covered by the REF.
- 2 With the REFs importance to research institutions across the UK, the RSE has maintained a long-standing interest, first engaging in this area in 2009 by responding to the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) consultation on the initial proposals for the Research Excellence Framework¹.
- 3 We are strongly of the view that research and teaching must have equal status and standing within universities. Thus, the RSE supported, with several caveats, the UK Government's proposals to improve the standard of teaching through a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in a January 2016 response to a consultation by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills². In that Advice Paper the RSE stressed that excellence should be the byword in moving forward the agenda of teaching in Higher Education Institutions (HEI), and we reiterate this sentiment in relation to research.
- 4 The Advice Paper has been approved by the General Secretary of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the President of the Learned Society of Wales.

QUESTION 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 (quality related research funding)? Should the definition of impacts be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?

- 5 The Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Learned Society of Wales consider that peer review continues to be the best way in which to measure the quality of research, and that quality assessment is necessary for accountability in the allocation of QR. Peer review, however, is not perfect and in the interests of a more open, accountable and outward-facing research system we recommend (where applicable) that quantitative data – regarding published outputs – continue to have a place in informing peer review judgements of research quality in future exercises.
- 6 While we have some concerns over the ability of the REF to fairly address smaller research groups and assess interdisciplinary research, as well as over cost, both in terms of human and financial resources, we consider that the REF is an improvement over the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and that the general direction of travel is positive.
- 7 We support the use of impact statements in the REF, which have proved a worthwhile addition to the process. In assessing impact, we recommend building on the analysis of the impact case studies from REF2014 to develop clear guidelines for the use of 14 quantitative indicators in future impact case studies. They should include standards for the collection of metadata to ensure the characteristics of the research being described are captured systematically; for example, by using consistent monetary units. Impacts statements will continue to play a useful role in allowing fair assessment of many disciplines.

¹ https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/2009/09_16.pdf

² https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/2016/AP16_01.pdf

- 8 The introduction of 'environment' as an index for assessment has proved unsuccessful in giving universities sufficient clarity over what is actually being measured. Assessment must be as objective as possible if the REF exercise is to be quantifiable, and we consider that the nature of the information provided for the environment component of the REF2014 meant that it was a challenge to ensure complete objectivity in scoring. The ability of an institution to construct an essay that catered to certain expectations of a panel may have, in cases, taken precedence over other evidence on the "vitality and sustainability"³ of a research institution. The current system may also favour new and developing environments over older consistent ones, which may, nevertheless, be of the highest standard. Should this index continue, it is important that there is a very clear template indicating what is expected and exactly what will be evaluated.
- 9 We also note the potential disadvantage faced by small research groups without the infrastructure available to larger groups. Action should be taken to ensure that research undertaken by small departments is in no way disadvantaged, and that research is fairly assessed and not penalised.
- 10 The interpretation of what constitutes the 'impact' of research understandably differs by discipline and is therefore difficult to define satisfactorily. The impact of research will naturally manifest itself in different ways which may be more obvious or tangible in areas such as science, and less clear in others such as the arts and humanities. However, it is our view that there is a level of confidence across the academic disciplines that these differences can be managed. We consider that the current definition of 'impact' is as broad as is feasible and provides sufficient scope to incorporate all disciplines. 'Non-academic' panel members from industry and elsewhere were a valuable asset in scoring impact.
- 11 The RSE and the LSW acknowledge that there is an argument to be made for the impact of research moving with an individual. Measurable impact often occurs over a medium or long-term period in which it is possible that those behind the research will move institutions. However, we also note that allowing this would likely serve to incentivise the 'poaching' of research staff in order to inflate the REF scores of universities and so, on balance, we suggest that gaming might be reduced by keeping impact with the institution in which the research took place.
- 12 We note the view that the addition of a metric to measure quantity of output to the REF process could be beneficial in allowing recognition for HEIs with high productivity. However, we stress our view that excellence must remain the key principle in evaluating research and we would not wish to see this diluted.
- 13 The current guidelines on the double-weighting of outputs are insufficiently clear. This caused some confusion in submissions to REF2014, particularly in those humanities subjects where greater stress is placed upon the single-authored monograph. More explicit criteria require to be developed and clearly communicated to HEIs.
- QUESTION 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 REF2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?**
- 14 While we consider that the REF has served as a driver of improvement over the RAE in many areas, the decision to reduce the number of Units of Assessment from 67 panels to just 37 has been counterproductive. This reduction in the number of panels has meant that the REF no longer serves the purpose of assessing individual departments. For example, while it is possible to access the results by institution for 'modern languages and linguistics', more specific subjects such as French or Italian are no longer assessed. The same concern can be observed in engineering and science; for some smaller disciplines this meant a variety of "merging", often dictated by the way the universities decided to approach the REF.
- 15 The decision to reduce the number of panels also led to some disciplines being inelegantly grouped together. The merits of an area such as archaeology being assessed by a sub-panel along with geography and environmental studies are, at best, unclear.
- 16 The RSE and LSW recommend that consideration is taken in future to more carefully identify which disciplines are genuinely cognate and are therefore appropriate to group together in a single Unit of Assessment.
- 17 The reduction has also added a significant burden upon the assessors sitting on the panels and sub-panels. In addition to asking the assessors to evaluate disciplines to which they may not have a significant connection or in which they may have limited expertise, the new system has also significantly increased the workload of those on the panels. Some assessors were required to read in excess of 1000 outcomes during the REF2014 process. This is a heavy burden. We would therefore strongly oppose any further reduction to the number of Units of Assessment.

3 <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/assessmentcriteriaandleveldefinitions/>

- 18 We do not believe that there would be a benefit to reporting any dimensions of the REF at a more aggregate or institutional level and that reporting should remain local.
- 19 The RSE and the LSW see no clear justification as to why outputs referenced in an impact case study must meet the criteria to be of two-star quality. Outputs which have been judged to be of a one-star standard are considered to be of a “quality that is recognised nationally”⁴ and so it is unnecessary to exclude them from case studies. We recommend that the standard of output referenced in impact case studies be lowered to one star.
- 20 We have found little benefit in the use of impact templates and consider these should not be used again in the future in their current form. It may be that some aspects of the impact strategy could be included in the environmental template.
- 21 It is our view that impact case studies should be permitted to cross two REF assessment processes. While it would be wrong to prevent this, there would need to be clear guidelines which required submission of evidence explaining the difference from a previous submission and the impact in succeeding years.

QUESTION 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?

- 22 As the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Learned Society of Wales are not research institutions we do not use the information gathered through the REF in this way. This information would, however, potentially prove useful for strategic planning in research institutions through aiding identification of where investment and disinvestment might occur.

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

- 23 We have no response to this question.

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

- 24 Whatever process or method is used to assess quality, behaviour will always alter to suit the system. A decade ago, before the introduction of impact statements, institutions were not necessarily considering the impact of the research they undertook. The need to produce such

statements has had the positive effect of forcing institutions and researchers to look at this important factor.

- 25 Interdisciplinary research can be encouraged by providing clear guidelines on how this research should be assessed. Sharing illustrations of good practice and providing exemplars of what constitutes ‘good’ interdisciplinary research across a wide range of disciplines would encourage such research to take place. It would also encourage the submission of interdisciplinary research that has already occurred, but may not have been submitted due to concerns over how it would be evaluated. We also note that before interdisciplinary research can be fairly assessed and potentially flourish, it must first be properly funded. This is vital.
- 26 Collaboration between universities and other public or private bodies could be improved by following the same method we recommend for encouraging interdisciplinary research: clear guidelines should be published on how research in this area will be assessed; and examples of what constitutes ‘good’ collaborative research between universities and a variety of different bodies should be made available.

QUESTION 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?

- 27 We note that universities now have a better understanding of the REF process and are able to shape their submissions accordingly. It is important that the information provided to the panels allows an objective assessment, and that it is not overly influenced by skilled drafting of submissions. While it is vital that submissions properly reflect the reality of what is taking place at an institution it must also be acknowledged that a certain amount of ‘gaming’ is inevitable.
- 28 The potential for universities to attempt to ‘poach’ academics from other institutions with a previous record of success in the REF is noted. Action should be considered to discourage universities from specifically headhunting individuals for the primary reason of inflating REF scores. We recognise, however, that this may prove difficult in practice. While this is clearly an unintended consequence of the system, the practice artificially inflates salaries and costs as institutions attempt to outbid each other to recruit or retain research staff. In some cases, headhunting of individuals who can perform well in the REF, can have bad impact on teaching.

⁴ <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/assessmentcriteriaandleveldefinitions/>

- 29** As universities are able to select which academic staff are submitted to the REF, a better measure of the UK-wide research base and its performance may be secured by requiring that universities submit all research staff and not just a carefully selected subset. Ensuring that all staff with a research element in their contract are assessed by the REF would also strengthen the credibility of the figures derived from the process. We do note, however, that requiring this may lead to increased costs for the process and potentially create a larger burden on universities and assessors, which would not be desirable.
- 30** We note the argument that requiring all research staff be returned could lead some universities to move employees from research to teaching-only contracts. Provided this is in line with the role that is actually being performed, and that teaching and research are held in equal status and standing, we see no reason why this should be considered a negative outcome.
- 31** The requirement for submissions to consist of four published research output items should be examined. Discussion should take place over whether this is the optimum number of outputs. It is important that the mandated figure does not discourage long-term and longer-form research, but also that it requires a sufficient number of outputs to prove representative of the standard of research that has occurred.

QUESTION 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?

- 32** As discussed in our response to Question 2, we feel that the reduction in the number of panels from the RAE2008 to the REF2014 has had a negative effect. Some academic disciplines, particularly smaller departments, risk losing their identity after being amalgamated into overarching, and in some cases unrelated, groupings for assessment. The current number of Units of Assessment provides little room for smaller disciplines to be assessed and showcase their success. Quality must be what is most important, not size, and this is what should be assessed. Research funders should be discouraged from applying volume thresholds based on the REF.
- 33** We also echo our sentiment that the decrease in Units of Assessment has led to a significantly increased workload on panel members. This clearly impeded their ability to participate in other scholarly activity for a prolonged period of time.

- 34** The RSE and the LSW suggest that one route that should be examined as a potential solution to reduce the workload is sampling. We recommend that research be undertaken into whether sampling is a viable tool which could be used as part of the REF to assess fairly and accurately the quality of research. We note the work of Professor David Firth of the University of Warwick in this regard.

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

- 35** We have no response to this question.

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

- 36** We stress the importance of having individuals of the highest quality to sit on the REF panels, and sub-panels, while having some regard to the desirability of broad geographic representation. It is therefore important that these positions are made as attractive as possible to interest the best candidates from all regions and backgrounds. Reducing the burdensome workload of panellists would be a helpful first step.
- 37** We also believe that the role the main panels serve in acting as moderators for sub-panels should be made clearer. It is natural, and perhaps unavoidable, that sub-panels will feel the need to act in a way that casts their respective disciplines in the most positive light. It is proper that the main panels should act to moderate these sub-panels. Such moderation should be completely transparent.

Additional Information

This Advice Paper has been signed off by the General Secretary of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and by the President of the Learned Society of Wales.

Any enquiries about this response should be addressed to Craig Denham, Policy Advice Officer (cdenham@royalsoced.org.uk).

All responses are published on the RSE website (www.royalsoced.org.uk).

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