

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

MillionPlus response to HECFE's call for evidence on metrics to support the Knowledge Exchange Framework

Alan Palmer Head of Policy and Research

30 January 2018

1. What approaches and data need to be used to ensure a fair and meaningful comparison between different universities, taking into account factors that might impact individual institution's knowledge exchange performance (such as research income, size or local economic conditions), whilst allowing identification of relative performance? How should benchmarking be used?

Knowledge exchange needs to be considered in as broad a way as possible. Focusing only on technology transfer, IP spin outs, licensing and patent counts will overlook the diversity of the knowledge exchange activity undertaken by universities. It risks emphasising activities, which often benefit research intensive institutions over those, such as user-centred, personal and individual relationship activities, that are found across the full breadth of the sector.

Announcements made by the government so far have made the connection between KEF and an increase in funding allocated via HEIF. While new funding is always to be welcomed, the concern is that if existing HEIF mechanisms are used without any new approaches being introduced, then KEF will simply replicate some of the issues with HEIF. Smaller institutions can be excluded, especially those that work with a large number of organisations but without generating the threshold income required to trigger HEIF funding.

The speed at which the KEF needs to be established, in order to meet Ministerial announcement priorities, may mean that there is insufficient time to identify, test and assess new metrics. If that is the case, then this first iteration of KEF should be seen as stage one in the development of a broad set of metrics to capture the full range of knowledge exchange activities that are undertaken by universities.

There should be several easy to collect metrics covering the diverse range of knowledge exchange in the sector. Ideally, metrics will be easy and inexpensive to measure or already available through existing data, and they will capture elements of KE that are of national importance, be indicators of successful KE, and provide a basis for reasonable and transparent comparisons between institutions. An example might be the number of new startups which is relevant to the Industrial Strategy, easy to monitor, and indicates vibrancy in one aspect of KE.

Another option is that Knowledge Exchange income could be expressed as a ratio that takes into account the size/scale of the university, to allow smaller universities to be considered proportionally. This could be measured through for example, staff or student numbers or other metrics such as total research income. This would allow universities of different scale, as well as research-led and non-research led universities, to be more evenly compared in terms of KE performance.

In addition, the economic environment in which universities and their main business clients are operating should also be considered. There will be different needs, challenges and outputs for a large company working in a business park next to a city university compared to a micro-business based in a remote and rural location with no proximity to the research/academic base. Moreover, Knowledge Exchange for a remote

rural business may have other social and community impacts that may not be currently measured by economic metrics. In remote parts of the Highland and Islands of Scotland for example, one or two key local businesses becoming more competitive, through collaborative development in partnership with a university, may not only help that business to thrive but may maintain the sustainability of the entire local community. Impacts such as these might be captured in metrics detailing business size, location and economic environment.

2. Other than HE-BCI survey data, what other existing sources of data could be used to inform a framework, and how should it be used?

As noted in our response to question 1, a broader approach that looks to identify, recognise, reward and incentivise the wide range of knowledge exchange activities undertaken. Technology transfer indicators (no. of patents, spin-outs, etc.), or indicators such as number or value of research council grants, should only be part of the assessment.

In Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council Knowledge Transfer Grant metrics could serve as an example to be considered. This survey uses financial income coming into the universities through knowledge exchange activities and is based on auditable financial accounts. This makes the data more robust. This could then be supplemented with a parallel survey based on more qualitative criteria.

From the point of view of MillionPlus members, new assessments need to consider areas such as community engagement that is linked to provision of training for teachers and the health professions. This means that those universities are truly embedded throughout the local and regional economy, which is something that needs to be captured to fully understand knowledge exchange.

Accounting for the size and nature of HEIs, for example looking at relevant income as a proportion (e.g. HEBCI compared with QR and HEIF) may be a way of assessing the 'productivity' or added value of universities.

It would also be beneficial to reflect on the work done by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement in this area and consider the proposals included in their response.

3. What new (or not currently collected) data might be useful to such a framework?

Data and evidence, possibly via surveys, that identifies and captures some of the activities listed in our answer to questions 1 and 2 should be collected. Ideally, this would be for the first KEF exercise. This includes data on engagement, productivity, relationships that go beyond the metrics on income, IP, patents and so on. Again, the NCCPE is useful on this, but it is also important to consider the knowledge exchange relationships and activities created by practice-based learning.

Identifying and assessing new metrics is likely to take some time in development. However, if the KEF is going to be a tool for understanding the full range of what universities achieve in this area, then it is likely to be worth the effort. It is also important to do this to ensure that the KEF doesn't simply replicate existing funding allocations. That will not serve government priorities such as investing across the country and promoting regional economic growth.

4. How should KEF metrics be visualised to ensure they are simple, transparent and useful to a non-specialist audience?

While it is important to ensure that information is accessible to non-specialist audiences, it is equally important that complex and sophisticated relationships are not simply distilled into a number that can fit easily into a league table.

As noted in these response, knowledge exchange activities are diverse, complex and context-specific (e.g. dependent on location, business/public services needs, academic specialisms etc.). Therefore, any information summarising these activities has to take that into account and reflect the broad range of knowledge exchange.

5. Any other comments?

No additional comments