

## million+ Parliamentary Briefing

### Understanding the Research Excellent Framework

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#### Summary

On 18 December 2014 the results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) were published. These findings will be used as the basis for research funding decisions across the UK. The REF is jointly owned by the four UK higher education funding organisations, but managed by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE), on behalf of the Department for Employment and Learning (DELNI), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

This briefing is for those who may not be familiar with the detailed operations of higher education or research funding. It puts the REF in context, outlines how research quality is assessed in the UK, and puts the publication of the REF in political context, highlighting the next steps for Government and higher education funding bodies at a UK and devolved level.

Information on the results of the REF itself is available in a [key facts briefing](#) from the REF team at HEFCE. million+ has [responded](#) to the results publication with Professor Michael Gunn commenting “these results confirm that research excellence is found in all universities... Ministers and the funding councils now need to deliver a more balanced research funding formula that invests in all universities and provides the foundations for a broader research base.”

#### Key information

- REF provides information on the quality of research in UK higher education
- Most UK universities have some research activity
- Although higher education is mostly devolved this exercise is UK wide
- Research evaluation is infrequent: usually one publication in the lifetime of a Parliament
- This timing provides some medium-term stability for the UK’s research funding system
- The results in themselves do not set funding policy, but provide basis for decision making

#### The REF in context

The REF is a mechanism to assess the quality of research in UK higher education. Exercises similar to this have been conducted in UK higher education roughly every 4-6 years since 1986.

In terms of its use the REF has a similar role to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This was most recently published in 2008 when John Denham MP had responsibility for universities in his role as Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Greg Clark MP will be the first Conservative minister with responsibility for universities and science to receive the results of a UK-wide research quality evaluation since 1996 when Gillian Shepherd, now Baroness Shephard of Northworld, was in post.

The REF was originally scheduled for publication in 2013 but in 2010 David Willetts MP, then Universities and Science Minister, put the date back by a year to allow the establishment of “a measure of impact that is methodologically sound and that commands the assent of the academic community.” This postponement also had the benefit of giving the Government more time to evaluate the impact of the first Comprehensive Spending Review on the higher education sector.

## **New features included in the REF**

### **Impact**

The REF included analysis of the “impact” of UK research. This has been designed to quantify the impact of universities’ research activity on the economy, public policy and wider society. This was a significant change from the previous exercise and its inclusion was controversial in some areas, characterised as incompatible with the principles of “blue sky” research. “Impact” measurements include social and environmental, as well as economic and were assessed using case studies.

### **Diversity in the research workforce**

Also for the first time, universities were permitted to make allowances for research staff who worked part time, had taken maternity leave, or had other personal circumstances to make a lower number of research submissions. This was designed to encourage institutions to recruit staff who might not wish, or be able, to work intensively and full time over the assessment period.

## **Understanding the results**

### **Media rankings**

Although rankings and tables of institutional results will be published the REF is designed to assess the quality of research in individual subject areas or “units of assessment”. Some institutions have a diverse subject spread; others concentrate on specific set of subjects. Tables that rank whole institutions will have aggregated results. There are a number of ways of doing this, which can lead to different ranking results.

### **Star system**

The system used by the REF awards “stars” to research that is at least “recognised nationally” (1 star). Work of this quality or higher is described as: “recognised internationally” (2 star), “internationally excellent” (3 star) or “world leading” (4 star). Currently, only research assessed at 3 star or 4 star levels is used to inform funding allocations to universities.

### **Quality profiles**

The REF results are published in the form of quality profiles for each area of work submitted by institutions. There are 36 units of assessment (UoAs) assessed by peer review sub-panels, themselves grouped into four Main Panels.<sup>1</sup> Institutions choose to submit work to particular sub-panels based on their particular areas of research specialism. There is no requirement to submit to all panels, nor for all university staff to be part of the assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> Main Panel A covers medicine, allied health disciplines, and life sciences. Main Panel B covers natural sciences, mathematics, computer sciences and engineering disciplines. Main Panel C covers social sciences. Main Panel D covers arts and humanities.

The overall quality profile is comprised of three sections: the quality of the research outputs (65% of the overall assessment); the impact of the research (20%) and the research environment in the unit of assessment e.g. research strategies, support for staff development, PhD students, collaborations (15%).

## **Further decisions for Government and Agencies**

### **Next steps for ministers**

The results of the REF are used by Ministers to inform policies about research funding. The current policy is to fund “internationally excellent” and “world leading” research. The inclusion of a specific assessment on the impact of research means that, although Ministers may still wish to maintain the policy of funding excellent research, they will no doubt wish to consider how that assessment of impact can be used to inform overall decisions.

### **Funding Councils**

Allocations to institutions are the responsibility of the four UK funding organisations, in light of the overall policy decisions taken by Ministers. The results of the REF will be used to inform these allocations for the 2015-16 financial year. The expectation is that the funding councils will make announcements on this in early 2015.

### **Relationship with Science and Innovation Strategy**

The Government’s [Science and Innovation Strategy](#) was presented to Parliament on 17 December. There is no direct formal relationship between this document and the REF. The strategy relates to capital investment whereas Research Council spend influenced by REF relates to recurrent funding for research.

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