

## million+ response to the Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework

### March 2016

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### Introduction

#### The purpose of the REF

1. The REF has multiple purposes, as did the research assessment exercises that came before it. The four UK funding bodies have always been clear that the REF (and the RAE) is an assessment exercise that informs allocations, rather than directs it. From the 'About the REF' page on [www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk):

- *The primary purpose of REF 2014 was to assess the quality of research and produce outcomes for each submission made by institutions:*
- *The four higher education funding bodies will use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their grant for research to the institutions which they fund, with effect from 2015-16.*
- *The assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment.*

*The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the higher education (HE) sector and for public information.*

- **The REF should continue to have as its primary purpose the assessment of the quality of research, with that assessment informing the allocation of funding and providing accountability for investment in research.**

2. Peer review is a fundamental part of research assessment, driving the decisions taken by panels in successive assessment exercises. This retrospective approach, as in the REF, is mirrored by prospective peer review, as in the work of the research councils or national academies when taking decisions about grant awards. The use of metrics has a part to play, but it should be in support of peer review, rather than instead of it. We would commend the recent report, *The Metric Tide*, in any consideration of any extension of the use of metrics in research assessment.<sup>1</sup>

- **The use of metrics has a part to play in research assessment, and in any future REF, but it should be in support of peer review, rather than instead of it.**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/metrictide/Title,104463,en.html>

## The role of the REF on research funding

3. The REF plays a key role in informing the allocation of quality-related research for the four funding organisations. However, it is also a significant tool for providing accountability for public investment and information about the research performance of the UK HE sector, and extremely important for reputation – of academics, institutions and the UK sector globally. Arguably, even if no funding decisions were taken in light of research assessment, it would still be a valuable activity for the sector.
4. Decisions about the future of research assessment should therefore be taken in this overall context and not be driven solely by a desire to manage differently the ways in which funding bodies allocation resource to institutions.
5. There are certainly questions to be asked about the allocation of research funding, and not just quality-related research funding. This form of research funding is increasingly concentrated in a smaller number of universities, and further concentrated geographically, particularly in England. In 2015-16, 6 English universities received almost 40% of the available recurrent research funding from HEFCE.<sup>2</sup> In a speech in July 2015, the Minister for Universities and Science noted that 46% of investment goes to the golden triangle of universities (Cambridge, Oxford and some London institutions).<sup>3</sup>
6. These funding patterns are of concern, but we would argue that they are for governments and funding organisations to consider separate to questions on how research conducted by universities is assessed.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Even if no funding decisions were taken in light of research assessment, such an exercise would still be a valuable activity for the sector.**
  - **The review of the REF should not result in an exercise that would lead to more concentration of funding in a smaller number of universities.**

## Changes to units of assessment

7. There may be scope to reduce or amend the units of assessment in the next REF. However, this should be considered from the perspective of academic and organisational relevance rather than prioritise the allocation of QR resource to institutions. In order to properly assess the quality and impact of research, the units of assessment need to relate to the way in which research is conducted in institutions. The reduction of units from 60+ in 2008 to 36 in 2014 went some way to reducing the burden on institutions in managing submissions, but also raised concerns about the downgrading of some disciplines where they no longer had a dedicated UoA. Any further changes to the number of UoAs would need careful discussion and must be the subject of a consultation with the research community

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<sup>2</sup>

[http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/million+\\_submission\\_to\\_BIS\\_Committee\\_productivity\\_inquiry\\_September\\_2015.pdf](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/million+_submission_to_BIS_Committee_productivity_inquiry_September_2015.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> JO Johnson MP, 16 July 2015: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/one-nation-science>

<sup>4</sup> The 4 UK funding organisations allocate research funding according to their own priorities.

conducted via HEFCE (or the yet-to-be-established Office for Students). Since research is assessed at the discipline level, though grouped into cognate 'main panel' areas, it is sensible to report the different elements in this way – e.g. as was done in the reporting of the REF results.

8. Aggregating these to institutional level would be problematic as it has the potential to favour universities with high levels of research activity across most of their university faculties, and to therefore mask the performances of universities with discrete areas of research in only some areas of their overall provision. One of the benefits of the current reporting approach is that it is clear where there are pockets of research excellence, demonstrating that this activity is taking place throughout the whole sector and across the UK. This understanding may well be damaged if aggregate reporting masked this diversity by giving undue prominence to institutions with extensive research capacity.
  - **Aggregate reporting of REF results, masking the diversity of sector by giving undue prominence to institutions with extensive research capacity, would damage the principle of identify research excellence wherever it is found.**

### **The REF's role in promoting research excellence wherever it is found**

9. One particular strength of successive research assessment exercises has been in the identification and support of new areas of research taking place in universities that had not traditionally been involved in research activity to a significant degree. The principle of identifying research excellence wherever it is found means that policy makers and funding organisations have had to look beyond a narrow group of universities with long-standing research reputations. This has meant a concerted effort in recognising that research takes place in every university, albeit it to different degrees, conducted in different ways (e.g. practice-based research) to the benefit of all students in UK universities. It has also benefited the development of new research specialisms and provided support to early career researchers. The recent REF went to great efforts to promote equality and diversity of research staff.
10. The advantage of this approach to identify, encourage, support and reward excellence wherever it is found is apparent when looking at the results of the REF 2014. This identified that 53% of research at modern universities<sup>5</sup> is judged as world-leading or internationally excellent. It also confirmed that 61% of research at modern universities is judged to have impact that is outstanding or very considerable in terms of reach and significance. This demonstrates the value of investing in research capacity across the sector, rather than concentrating funding on only a few institutions.
11. The role of the REF and assessment exercises previous to it have been hugely valuable in supporting and strengthening the reputation of UK research. Although there are funding gains from successful performance in the REF, for institutions it is also equally important that they are able to point to evidence about their research strengths. For modern universities in particular, which are often subjected to incorrect assumptions, the results of successive research assessment exercises have been vital in challenging misplaced perceptions about the nature and excellence of their research activity.

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<sup>5</sup> By which we mean any university that has gained title since 1992

12. The results of the REF announced in December 2014 confirmed that excellent research continues to take place across the country in all areas of research in all universities and not just in a small number of institutions. It also confirmed that the proportion of research being judged at 4 and 3 star level increased significantly over the previous 6 years.

- **The reputational benefits from REF results - to institutions individually and to the sector more broadly - are fundamental to a successful research base.**

### **Using the REF to drive excellence and productivity**

13. The REF2014 exercise differed significantly from the RAE2008 exercise that preceded it by including an assessment of the impact of research carried out by universities. Though met with some concern by many in the sector, particularly around what proportion of the overall assessment would be assigned to the impact of the research, the results from the REF have provided significant value to the sector and to government. The information and data available from the REF demonstrate the breadth of the different kinds of research taking place in universities, shifting the emphasis away from only original research to the application and translation of research findings to solutions that have impact for businesses, society, public health, culture and the wider UK economy. The government and research funders should capitalise on this evidence to increase and strengthen the support offered to universities working in the area of application and translation. Using this evidence to focus other investment outside of quality-related research funding could play a major role in boosting productivity throughout the UK.

14. Giving the emphasis from the government on the use of its investment in the research conducted by universities to support the productivity agenda, there is an argument to consider whether the current balance between outputs, impact and environment is fit for this purpose. Increasing the proportion of the overall profile rating that is derived from an assessment of the impact of research would send a strong signal to the sector of the value placed on this work.

15. In order to support the government's aim that its investment in research should deliver impact, the proportion of the final assessment related to the latter should be increased from the current 20% of the final assessment. This could for example include a stronger emphasis on the valuable translational research carried out by institutions to support businesses and not-for-profit organisations.

16. Much of the data collected from the REF is data that is collected centrally through the funding bodies and HESA. The coordinated approach adopted for this exercise by the REF team to collect and share this data with institutions reduced the effort required by individual universities and ensured a greater consistency. Further improvements in this area could support the government and research funders in understanding the performance of the sector. Part of this work would inevitably involve activity to identify which additional data would increase understanding on the part of government and research funders, and ways in which this can be obtained without placing any further administrative burden on to institutions.

## **The REF's role in incentivising academic and institutional behaviour**

17. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research was explicitly encouraged as part of REF2014. This should remain so in any future assessment exercise. The research councils also promote collaboration through their focus on strategic areas and grand challenges in allocating some of their awards to institutions.
18. Where it makes sense to collaborate with other universities, or where interdisciplinary research is the best way forward in examining a problem, academics and universities will take that path. Using the REF to promote it simply for the sake of collaboration would not be wise – as with all key decisions in higher education - should be evidence led and not solely because it is wished by government.
  - **Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research was explicitly encouraged as part of REF2014, and should continue to be the case in any future assessment exercise.**
19. The competitive nature of the REF – for example, in both how it is used to influence funding and league tables – makes promoting collaboration or interdisciplinary research a challenging prospect. Universities have much to gain – not least a stable investment stream – from successful participation in the REF, so may be cautious about risking this through uncertain and unproven activity. The reputational impact and perceptions that arise from the REF would need to be addressed if the Government wanted to encourage universities to increase their research activity in innovative and untested areas that may be more prone to 'failure' within the time period covered by research assessment.
20. If the government wishes to explicitly acknowledge and reward universities for engaging in collaboration and exploring innovative partnerships, it may be wiser to do it via other mechanisms - for example a dedicated fund for translational research - rather than add an extra element to the REF.
21. The next REF could incentivise certain behaviours in this area by increasing the proportion of the overall profile rating that is attributable to impact. Currently only a fifth of the overall rating is attributable to impact, while nearly two-thirds is based on original research outputs. This has two consequences. Firstly, it offers an in-built advantage to universities with long traditions of large research bases where they have developed capacity over years to produce high volumes of original research output. Secondly, it limits the benefits available following the REF for universities working to apply and translate research conducted elsewhere to benefit businesses, public health and regional economies.

## **The impact of the REF on the development of individuals and of academic disciplines**

22. Research assessment is inevitably going to have an impact on the choices made by individual researchers and by institutions. The REF leads to reputational and financial benefits to both groups, and so it is rational for them to consider these in making decisions about career paths and research activity. The REF is a selective, competitive exercise, therefore people will make decisions to maximise their success.

23. The challenge is to ensure that the impact of the REF is as constructive as possible. There have been concerns with the perception that producing journal articles during the REF period is more conducive to positive assessment, when compared to longer monologues or non-text outputs. The last REF attempted to address some of these concerns, but there is certainly scope to consider further how the rules regarding output submission can encourage rather than constrain innovative research activity and outputs. It is also worth considering whether other forms of research work and scholarship (e.g. public engagement, academic development, supporting businesses or public sector organisations) that benefit the disciplines and sector but are not linked to specific items of research output could be included in future criteria.

### **Using the REF to understand future research strategies**

24. The principle behind the quality-related funding allocated by the individual funding bodies is that it is part of a university's block grant for it to invest appropriately. This means that they have been able to focus on institutional research priorities and strengths secure in the knowledge that there will be a stable stream of investment for at least 5 years. This enables universities to increase capacity in areas of strength, develop new areas of interest or to risk / innovate in emerging areas of research without concern for short-term national priorities. This encourages creativity and collaboration between researchers within and between universities, or with other public or private organisations as there is more 'freedom to fail' with this framework.
25. The development in recent years in each of the research councils to manage significant proportions of their available investment according to particular priorities or grand challenges provides universities with the opportunity to conduct research into priority areas that may feed into national policy.
26. Government also continues to maintain significant influence in directing large-scale investment into priority areas, or in support of wider national policy, whether through its capital investment programme<sup>6</sup> or support for PhD students.<sup>7</sup>
27. Taken together, this approach seems to provide the balance between priorities driven by individual curiosity, by research communities and by national policy.
28. There is risk in requesting that universities, through the conduit of the next REF, lay out their plans for an as yet undefined time period. Universities are expected to be competitive, so would be reluctant to share widely their future plans or directions in any significant detail. This might lead to institutions sharing less, rather than more, of their proposed research strategy. This proposal would also interfere with institutional autonomy and may lead to universities taking rational decisions to write future

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<sup>6</sup> The government intends to invest £6.9bn in science capital up to 2021. Though some of this is allocated to organisations such as the research councils to manage at their discretion, the government has allocated much of the funding to specific capital projects

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/505308/bis-16-160-allocation-science-research-funding-2016-17-2019-20.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/505308/bis-16-160-allocation-science-research-funding-2016-17-2019-20.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/204-million-fund-for-uk-universities-to-train-future-science-leaders-and-boost-quantum-research>

strategies in line with government priorities, rather than investigating fundamental research questions, or identify areas of application that will support businesses. Universities could become more risk averse and less innovative if they were expected to write research plans to align with national policy. Even if this was something that a university wished to do, the time lag between writing submissions for the next REF and understanding the priorities of the next government after the 2020 election would make this task highly speculative at best, and fundamentally wrong at worst. As such, it is likely to be wasted effort.

## **Conclusion**

29. Research assessment (through both RAE and REF) has identified that excellent research is taking place in every university in the UK. It has supported the development of emerging areas of research and ensured that all universities can offer a learning environment influenced by high quality research and teaching. This has had a significant positive on the reputation of the sector.
30. Since 2008, however, research funding policy has served to concentrate funding into a smaller number of institutions. This has the potential to reduce capacity of the overall research base, and make it harder for businesses (especially SMEs) to access high quality research and knowledge exchange in their region.
31. Any reforms to the REF should not detract from the principles of identifying excellent research across the sector. The government should maintain its commitment to funding excellent research wherever it is found. We do not support any further concentration of research funding and believe that the government should do more to invest in translational research to support universities in working with businesses to grow and add value to regions around the country.

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