

Russell Group response to Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

1. Summary

- The REF is a fundamental part of the UK's dual support system for research funding. Whilst there is certainly scope to improve the REF and give more emphasis to critical mass at the institutional level, it should be recognised the RAE/REF has succeeded in driving up the quality of research in the UK by supporting a research culture focused on excellence.
- The REF should not be used as a regulatory or compliance tool as this undermines its focus on excellence.
- As a mechanism to underpin the distribution of QR funding, the REF is a relatively cost-effective exercise, although we would like to see costs reduced further. This could be achieved by, for example, extending the period between REF exercises, introducing a red tape challenge to identify simple practical changes, ensuring REF and Research Council requirements align where practical, introducing an institution-wide (but overall less burdensome) environment assessment and streamlining impact assessment.
- We would welcome a lighter touch REF overall and there are some areas where metrics can be useful, but peer review should remain at the heart of the process, with metrics used where appropriate to complement and aid human judgement.
- By maintaining the broad structure of the REF and broadly similar rules, universities will be able to draw on their experience of REF 2014 in order to prepare submissions more efficiently. Major changes to the exercise will require universities to invest additional time and effort in understanding new structures, processes and rules.
- Metrics may be seen at first sight as a quicker and cheaper alternative to peer review, but it is essential to be aware of the many shortcomings in their use. Importantly, metrics lack the element of judgement provided by the long-established and internationally-respected peer review process.

2. Purpose of QR and the REF

- 2.1 The REF serves several important purposes. In particular, the RAE/REF has played a key role in driving up the quality of research in the UK by supporting a research culture focused on excellence.
- 2.2 The REF is also the only UK-wide assessment of the health of individual disciplines and yields important information about institutional and departmental performance, giving universities a robust view of their research and allowing them to benchmark against each other. The results provide an indicator of research reputation across the UK which has helped to build the profile and status of UK research globally. In turn, this focus on excellence helps businesses and international partners to identify key research groups and universities to engage with, supporting efforts to drive university-business collaboration and inward investment as well as widening the UK's academic links internationally.
- 2.3 In addition, the REF process provides the public and policy makers with confidence that public investment in research is producing high quality research with tangible impact.

- 2.4 Of course, the REF is also a fundamental part of the UK's dual support system for research funding and helps to protect quality-related research funding (QR) funding. The combination of stable core funding and competitively awarded grants provided through the dual support system ensures the diversity and breadth of research in the UK.
- 2.5 QR funding should not be viewed in isolation, but should be seen as a mechanism which complements funding allocated via the Research Councils (and won competitively from other sources), enabling institutions to plan ahead and invest strategically. QR funding in its current form is vital in providing a stable base of research funding over reasonably long time periods when other areas of funding are uncertain. QR allows universities to respond to new opportunities and challenges, to work constructively with charities and business, and ensures they are not wholly concentrating on shorter-term research needs. Changing the basis on which QR funding is made risks undermining the main strength of this stream: its flexibility.
- 2.6 It is not yet known which organisation will take responsibility for the next REF and the allocation of QR funding, but it is essential there is appropriate expertise in the organisation to deal with issues pertaining to research and research funding; QR should continue to be kept at an arm's length from Government.

3. Driving excellence

- 3.1 The REF should recognise and reward the very highest levels of excellence in research and should avoid driving growth in lower quality research. It should also recognise the importance of higher concentrations of research excellence, critical mass and multi-disciplinarity. High concentrations of research excellence across disciplines are a foundation for innovative, interdisciplinary research collaborations often critical to solving global challenges.¹ It would be helpful if greater emphasis could be given to this institutional-level excellence in the next REF.
- 3.2 Increasing international representation on panels and sub-panels would help ensure judgements on what constitutes 'world-leading quality' take a truly international perspective. This could also boost the international visibility and credibility of the REF.
- 3.3 A key element to bolstering excellence through the REF is ensuring interdisciplinary research is properly recognised. Further clarity on, and encouragement of, cross-referring between panels may help ensure support for interdisciplinary research.
- 3.4 It would also be helpful for the REF to provide enhanced recognition for research that is done in groups and even collaboratively across institutions. The extent to which this occurs does vary according to discipline but should be a consideration in particular in the sciences.
- 3.5 There was a notable rise in ratings at the low-middle end in REF 2014, making it difficult to measure the increase in quality at the top end of the scale. For future exercises REF panels should consider steps to reduce the impact of such changes so the full range of marks is used to truly distinguish the highest levels of excellence.
- 3.6 There are pros and cons to insisting on 100% submission for all eligible staff in the REF. For now, we would suggest the proportion of eligible staff entered should be indicated in the environment section of the REF. This will enable panels to tell whether there has been a high degree of selectivity and consider what this may mean in terms of the quality of the research

¹ We have highlighted numerous examples of this in our recent publication and film on the impact of research at Russell Group universities, drawing on REF impact case studies, see: <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5324/engines-of-growth.pdf>

environment (e.g. if it only allows a very small percentage of FTEs to succeed or if the submission is dependent on many small fractional FTEs).

- 3.7 In order to maintain the link between impact and research excellence, impact case studies should continue to be linked to research rated at least at 2* level.
- 3.8 There is benefit in carrying out assessment of outputs at the Unit of Assessment (UoA) level; and the level of granularity in REF 2014 was about right. Further reducing the number of UoAs may make it hard to identify excellence within individual fields and could undermine the confidence of some parts of the academic community who may be concerned their research will be assessed by sub-panels without appropriate expertise. However, efforts should be made to ensure appropriate UoA size and sufficiently coherent subject combinations. A key concern with REF 2014 was the large size of some UoAs under Main Panel A in particular.
- 3.9 The REF should not be used as a regulatory or compliance tool as this undermines its focus on excellence. For example, pursuing open access must not be allowed to compromise the quality of submissions in the next REF. Research outputs should be judged solely on their own merits (i.e. on research quality factors, not on where or how they are published).

4. Reducing burden, red tape and bureaucracy

- 4.1 As a mechanism to underpin the distribution of QR funding, the REF is already a relatively cost-effective exercise, although we would still like to see costs reduced further.
- 4.2 The cost of REF 2014 has been estimated to be roughly 2.4% of the £10.2 billion in QR research funds projected to be distributed between 2015-16 and 2020-21², although we recognise the costs are higher when compared to the *change* in funding distribution between exercises. The costs of the REF per unit of QR could be reduced by extending the period between REF exercises; other cost-reduction measures can also be considered as highlighted below, but it is important not to lose the value of REF in seeking to reduce costs. Alternatively, increasing the amount of QR funding distributed over the same REF time period could reduce the relative burden of a new REF.
- 4.3 Much of the additional administrative activity generated as a result of REF, including the process of internal review, performance management and strategy development, is likely to occur within institutions regardless of the REF as these mechanisms are a part of good management practice. Therefore, at least some of the quoted costs should be considered as part of the normal business of universities in managing their research performance.
- 4.4 By maintaining the broad structure of the REF, and broadly similar rules, universities should be able to draw on their experience of REF 2014 in order to prepare submissions more efficiently. Similarly, the team running the REF will also be able to draw more readily on REF 2014 experience. Any major changes to the exercise will require universities to invest additional time and effort in understanding new structures, processes and rules (and there will also be costs to HEFCE in developing and putting these changes into operation).
- 4.5 As well as looking for similar approaches from one REF to the next, the overall burden associated with research management could be reduced by ensuring REF and Research Council requirements align where possible. For example, designing compatible open access rules and making research information systems more interoperable. The Funding Councils and the Research Councils should work closely to ensure they adopt consistent approaches wherever possible which are practical and low-burden for research-intensive universities that will be affected most.

² REF accountability review: costs, benefit and burden. Technopolis for HEFCE (July 2015).

- 4.6 As part of its future REF consultation with universities, HEFCE could run a ‘red tape challenge’ by collating feedback on implementation and administrative issues as well as on the structure and method of assessment. Issues to consider include aligning deadlines for impact, staff inclusion and publication, with a later deadline for submission including hard copy and redacted outputs.
- 4.7 We recognise that the transfer of researchers from one institution to another, particularly close to the REF census deadline, can create challenges. Solutions to address this should be considered (such as the possibility of applying a weighting depending on the length of time an individual has been at an institution), provided any new rules do not create undue additional burden in the system or simply move problems to an earlier date.

Outputs

- 4.8 To reduce the amount of work required by panels, a sampling mechanism could be considered, at least for UoAs with high volume submissions, whereby panellists could assess just two or three of the four outputs. A pilot could be conducted to test whether assessing a proportion of the submitted outputs would lead to significantly different results from assessing them all and whether an algorithm could be designed to implement sampling in a fair way.

Impact

- 4.9 A large part of the cost and burden of REF 2014 was due to the novelty of including impact assessment as a new dimension.³ However, this has yielded valuable insights into the wider social, economic and cultural impacts of research and is also helping encourage researchers to consider these potential benefits as an important part of the research activity.
- 4.10 Increasing the impact weighting to 25% for the next REF could be considered, but greater flexibility would be welcome around impact case studies themselves – and the overall number that universities have to submit could be reduced. Provided there is at least one impact case study per UoA to which the university is submitting, institutions should be able to choose to submit case studies at the level they consider most appropriate: UoA, Main Panel or institutional level. This could aid the recognition of cross-disciplinarity within institutions and could also reduce the “cliff edge” issue regarding staff selection in each UoA.⁴
- 4.11 Impact can mean different things for different disciplines and the ‘one size fits all’ definition used for REF 2014 should be reviewed. For example, ‘knowledge exchange’ could be more clearly emphasised in the humanities disciplines, as long as this is linked to excellent research.
- 4.12 In addition, institutions should be able to re-submit REF 2014 case studies where subsequent impact can be demonstrated. HEFCE should publish guidance on the rules around re-submission as early as possible.

Environment and templates

- 4.13 The most useful elements of the impact template could be incorporated into the environment template in a simplified form to reduce the workload for both institutions and panel members.

³ As noted in the REF Accountability Review: Costs, benefits and burden.

⁴ As part of an analysis of a sample of Russell Group REF impact case studies we found that 59% of case studies were interdisciplinary. There is, therefore, a strong argument that impact is, in fact, less tied to a single specific discipline and moving the impact assessment to the panel level may be beneficial for interdisciplinary research. More information can be found in our report *Engines of Growth*.

4.14 An overarching environment submission covering the whole institution would also help reduce burden and repetition. Here, metrics could be used more extensively and successfully alongside qualitative information in bullet point form. Sufficient detail would still be needed at disciplinary level, but universities would be able to demonstrate institutional strategy, critical mass of research excellence and key interdisciplinary links across the institution all in one place, rather than repeating this for each UoA.

Time periods

- 4.15 The cumulative impact of the recent HE Green Paper, Nurse Review and Stern Review will be a disruptive one and time will be needed for the outcome of these consultations to be implemented and embedded into a new over-arching architecture for UK higher education research. It is likely HEFCE will also run a subsequent consultation on detailed aspects of the next REF and its implementation. As such, we would suggest considering a delay to the next REF. The gap between RAE 2001 and the subsequent RAE was pushed back to seven years without undermining the system and it is reasonable to assume the interval could be stretched again (rather than reverting to a six-year cycle).
- 4.16 A short delay may be needed anyway to allow enough time for any successor organisation to HEFCE to run the next REF with confidence. This should also give institutions sufficient time to understand and implement the new guidance. One of the weaknesses of REF 2014 was that guidance was published late in the process and there were difficulties when changes and updates to the guidance came at different points during the exercise.⁵ With additional time, HEFCE (or its successor) should be able to minimise the need for any updates to the guidance at a later stage.
- 4.17 Since REF time periods are already longer than Parliamentary terms (and maybe even longer in future), it would be reassuring to have a cross-party commitment that, if a REF exercise has already been timetabled, it will be seen through to conclusion with concomitant funding to follow. This would ensure effort put in by institutions and researchers to prepare for a REF is not wasted by the potential cancellation of an exercise due to political change whilst it is already underway.

5. Metrics and peer review

- 5.1 It is essential the REF methodology is based on the latest thinking about research assessment, utilises peer review and continues to have the confidence of the higher education sector and other stakeholders, in all countries of the UK and internationally.
- 5.2 A large part of the REF's success is due to the rigour of the assessment process, making it essential that expert peer review is retained at the core of the exercise. Although we would like to see a reduction in the administrative burden associated with REF, this should not be at the expense of reducing or removing expert peer review, particularly for outputs and impact.
- 5.3 Whilst metrics may be seen at first sight as a quicker and cheaper alternative to peer review, there are many known shortcomings in their use, for example in relation to equality and diversity issues; differences between and within different disciplines that metrics would struggle to capture; and the ability to 'game' data. Importantly, metrics lack the element of judgement that is at the heart of the long-established peer review process – as the independent review on metrics concluded:

⁵ Evaluating the 2014 REF: Feedback from participating institutions – report prepared by the Funding Councils (March 2015).

Even if technical problems of coverage and bias can be overcome, no set of numbers, however broad, is likely to be able to capture the multifaceted and nuanced judgements on the quality of research outputs that the REF process currently provides.⁶

- 5.4 We do not see a strong argument for extending the use of metrics for assessment of outputs beyond what was permitted within REF 2014. The element of judgement that peer review enables is essential when evaluating a diverse range of outputs across the research spectrum – and even more so when considering the quality of interdisciplinary research. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work across UoAs (particularly for arts and humanities) so we would propose sub-panels should be able to decide whether they would find it useful to have bibliometric data made available to them to *inform* peer review. As the field of research metrics continues to evolve, their use in future iterations of REF should be kept under review.
- 5.5 There is no convincing evidence that there should be any significant role for metrics in assessing impact; peer review must remain the primary method of assessment here. Again, the diversity of impacts delivered as a result of excellent research makes comparisons and judgements very difficult unless by peer review. However, some of the quantitative data provided within the impact case studies could be more standardised in places to improve comparison between, and analysis of, case studies. In addition, moving to an online format with a degree of standardisation of basic metadata (e.g. name of institution, UoA, disciplines/subject areas involved, funding details) would help facilitate analysis and the use of case studies post-publication.
- 5.6 Metrics could be used much more extensively and successfully in the environment section of REF. Indeed, this whole section could be simplified radically. Moving more towards metrics here would build on a tested precedent as some quantitative data is already used for the assessment of the research environment. Using additional existing data sets such as HEBCI data collected by HESA on collaborative research and contract income could be considered. Focusing on data that is largely collected already could also allow institutions to benchmark themselves on a more regular basis.
- 5.7 Nevertheless, it would be helpful to retain the opportunity to provide qualitative contextual information in the environment section. This information should be provided in short bullet points with a fixed word limit in order for the assessment to focus on the content of the information provided rather than the quality of written presentation.
- 5.8 It was suggested in the recent HE Green Paper that REF results could be ‘refreshed’ with metrics in between peer reviewed exercises. The implications of this idea should be considered very carefully in order not to create perverse incentives in the system, not to undermine the validity and credibility of the peer review exercises and not to add burden and cost inadvertently.

March 2016

⁶ ‘The Metric Tide’, Report of the independent review on the role of metrics in research assessment and management (July 2015).