
Research Excellence Framework 2021 Consultation



Background

Public funding for research in Higher Education in England is distributed through the 'dual-support system' with funding coming through either the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in the form of a 'block grant', or through UK Research Councils for specific projects. HEFCE distributes its £1.6 billion annual block-grant quality-related (QR) funding based on a cyclical assessment of research quality; the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The REF is based on institutions submitting research outputs for assessment by expert panels, along with written evidence about the wider social and economic impact of their research outside of academia, and how they go about supporting research to be of a high quality ('the research environment').

Institutions submissions are organised around 'Units of Assessment (UoA)' that cover broad subject areas and it is at this level that outcomes are assessed and reported. Results are given through a four-point star-based scale of 1* (low) - 4* (high). Each institution receives an overall quality profile of proportion of activity at each star level for each UoA it has submitted to, and then within each UoA a separate profile for each of the three key elements: outputs, impact and environment. The weighting between these three areas was set by HEFCE in 2014 as 60% on outputs, 20% on impact and 20% on environment. You can see results of REF 2014 [here](#).

The last REF was conducted in 2014 and following the outcomes of a significant government review of the process, led by Lord Stern in December 2015, HEFCE has now released a [major consultation](#) on how the exercise should be taken forward. The consultation is wide ranging and particularly open ended in the questions and issues it raises. Some of the key issues, such as the ending of the practice by which institutions can submit research outputs undertaken by researchers previously employed elsewhere, could have significant implications for the future of research conducted in the UK.

Key issues

The funding bodies' proposals for the next REF are largely an evolution of the 2014 exercise, with changes mainly being proposed to try and reduce the burden on institutions, and addressing some of the known issues with the approach taken in 2014 and raised by Lord Stern in his review.

The consultation sets out a large number of technical changes to how the exercise is conducted, such as the subject area coverage of UoAs, and the process by which panel members are appointed and guidance and criteria developed. We do not repeat these here. It is worth noting however some key areas of more substantive change that audit committees may in particular wish to focus their attention on. We describe three of them here:



Removal of staff selection and decoupling staff from outputs

In previous exercises institutions could choose which staff and their associated research outputs should be submitted for assessment, and which UoA they wanted to submit them to. However, the expectation was that all staff submitted should have four outputs unless there were particular mitigating circumstances. This approach has been identified as causing a significant burden within institutions in determining who should be submitted, and in administering a mitigating circumstances process, and with the potential to be seriously divisive for staff and requiring careful management control.

The current proposal from HEFCE is to end this practice and require the submission of all research-active staff. In addition, it is proposed that UoAs will be mapped to HESA Cost Centres and these then used to determine which UoAs staff are associated with. By also calculating the number of outputs needed at UoA level rather than by individual staff member, greater flexibility could then be allowed for staff to submit less than four outputs. These changes are themselves not without technical challenge and HEFCE has invited views on them.

Portability of outputs

Previous exercises were based on the principle of researchers 'taking their research with them', that is to say that institutions could return research to be assessed for them, even if it was conducted whilst the researcher was employed elsewhere. This has long been considered one of the more controversial elements of the REF process, with accusations that it creates a 'transfer market' in researchers near the census date for REF assessment and drives up salary levels. Lord Stern's review proposed ending this principle with research being submitted only by the institution where the output was demonstrably generated. The implications of such a change could be profound, both technically in trying to understand and reliably document where research actually had been generated, and on subsequent recruitment and retention decisions by institutions and career decisions by staff. HEFCE's consultation does not clearly set out whether portability will be ended but instead seeks opinions on how to mitigate some of the technical challenges of doing so and whether an alternative system by which the research conducted by those moving close to the census data could be 'shared' between institutions.

Institutional-level assessment

Lord Stern's review suggested that REF 2021 should include assessment of impact and environment at institutional level, undertaken by an institutional assessment panel, in addition to assessment of these areas at UoA level. This is intended to provide institutions with the flexibility to showcase their interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts and to capture the aspects of environment that reflect the strategy, support and actions of the institution as a whole. HEFCE plan to conduct pilot activity in order to design processes to support these assessments, and propose that they will contribute around 5% to the 20% of the assessment looking at impact and 7.5% of the 15% looking at environment.

Observations

Based on our experiences working with institutions and elsewhere we would make the following observations on HEFCE's proposed approach to REF 2021, and in particular the implications for institutions that audit committees may wish to consider:

The bar for impact will get higher

2014 was the first year that the wider impact of research outside of academia were assessed as part of the REF exercise. In developing their internal systems and processes for capturing, recording and articulating these impacts for assessment purposes institutions were all in a similar position of having to



start, relatively speaking, 'from scratch'. There was no precedent of how panels would view impact, what would make for a good submission in this area or with what would make for good internal systems and processes to support these areas. Panel members were well aware of this when making their assessments. Whilst the HEFCE consultation proposes some changes to the detail of this area, and with the inclusion of an institutional-level element, it has so far remained fundamentally the same. It is therefore reasonable to expect that by 2021 panel members' expectations of quality of submissions in this area will rise, given the time now available to institutions to build and reflect on their approach to REF 2014. Institutions should therefore be putting concerted effort now into thinking about the strategic approach they take to ensuring that the impacts of their research on the wider world are maximised, and that they have effective systems and processes in place to ensure all possible impacts are captured and can be articulated in the most effective manner.

The devil is in the detail

Whilst the overall change to the assessment framework is small the cumulative impact of the many technical changes proposed within the consultation is potentially quite significant. Early engagement with the admirably open consultation process to fully understand and influence the details being proposed, their potential impact on individual institutions' own position, and therefore to create the appropriate institutional response will be vital. Detailed issues such as changes to the eligibility of staff, how research outputs are returned for assessment and the introduction of new elements such as the institutional level assessment will all be key factors in institutional performance in 2021 and ensuring that systems and processes adapt to these changes as they emerge should be a central concern.

Good timing of strategic changes will be vital

HEFCE's consultation closes in March 2017 with the outcomes of the process being expected soon after, thereby providing some level of certainty over the expected assessment framework to be used in 2021 by the end of this academic year. Based on our work with universities, and more broadly our experience of the sector, we are aware that a number of institutions are in the process of implementing new arrangements to support research or to change their strategic direction in this area. Whilst the REF 2021 is still some years away the need to ensure any planned major strategic changes have had time to take effect and fully bed in is vital to ensure performance is maximised in the 2021 exercise and we would therefore encourage early progress in making any such changes in the light of the outcomes of the HEFCE consultation next year.

How Uniac can Help

As the details of REF 2021 emerge we can work alongside you to design, develop and assure efficient and effective systems that help prepare your institution and help improve your performance.

We will work hard to understand the specific context at your institution, and to develop straightforward, pragmatic recommendations informed by best practice. With staff with direct experience of managing the REF and having served as an impact assessor on a REF panel we are ideally placed to aid your preparation.



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