

RSS RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON MODIFICATIONS TO THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE
FRAMEWORK (REF)

6 May 2022

Section one: purposes of research assessment

1. In addition to enabling the allocation of research funding and providing accountability for public investment in research, which purposes should a future UK research assessment exercise fulfil? Select all that apply.
 - a. Provide benchmarking information
 - b. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities
 - c. Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation
 - d. Create a performance incentive for HEIs.
2. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?
3. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.
4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

Ideally, assessment should have a clear and unambiguous purpose. REF already has two stated purposes (and the first of these, the allocation of funding, naturally creates a performance incentive for HEIs as in option d). In our view, REF is not well-suited for providing cross-disciplinary comparisons, and any purpose which hints at this should be avoided.

Section two: setting priorities

5. To what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 9 (least important)
 - a. Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.
 - b. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)
 - c. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate
 - d. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development
 - e. Impact of the system on research culture
 - f. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing
 - g. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021
 - h. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance
 - i. Robustness of assessment outcomes

6. Relating to research culture, to what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)
 - a. Impact of the assessment system on research careers:
 - b. Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion:
 - c. Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations)
 - d. Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research
 - e. Impact of the system on open research
 - f. Impact of the system on research integrity
7. What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? Please set out the considerations and indicate where they should be located in the list of priorities.
8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

All of 6a-f above are important and it would be invidious to rank them. However, we have particular concerns about the impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research. We consider that there remain large parts of the research community who are unconvinced that REF, in its current design, adequately recognises excellent interdisciplinary research.

Section three: identifying research excellence

9. Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?
(Multiple options: 'Should be heavily weighted' – 'Should be moderately weighted' – 'Should be weighted less heavily' – 'Should not be assessed' – 'Don't know')

 - a. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers)
 - b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards)
 - c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets)
 - d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward)
 - e. Engagement beyond academia
 - f. Societal and economic impact

g. Other (please specify).

10. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?

Research inputs should not be recognized. Where well-directed they will result in strong research outputs and gain recognition via that route. To separately recognize inputs risks double counting, at best, and recognizing unproductive research at worst.

11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate?
(Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Originality
- b. Significance
- c. Rigour

12. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?

There remains an issue that excellence with respect to originality and significance seem to be harder to recognise for interdisciplinary research.

13. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate?
(Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Reach
- b. Significance

14. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact?

The burden of evidence gathering associated with REF impact assessment means that REF case studies disproportionately present impacts where the link between research and impact is very close. Significant impactful research where the link to the impact is less immediate is much more challenging to include in REF with the result that REF arguably undersells the overall strength of UK research impact. Non-portability of research impact can also result in strong research impacts not being returned in REF.

15. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate?
(Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Vitality
- b. Sustainability

16. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?

Section four: assessment processes

17. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:

- a. stability
- b. currency of information
- c. both a. and b.
- d. neither a. nor b.
- e. Don't know.

18. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information?

We would recommend research into how significant is the conflict between stability and currency. In the current system (favouring stability with a 7-year gap between REF exercises), what is the evidence that currency has been compromised? The most important consideration is to develop a REF that is widely trusted and then evaluate how frequently it can realistically be held without placing to large a burden on the sector.

19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?

- a. Yes, split by main panel
- b. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)
- c. No
- d. Don't know.

20. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

We are unconvinced that this proposal would realise any benefits. In particular, the assignment of individuals to units of assessment would become an issue in a system where not all units were assessed at the same time.

21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?

- a. Individual
- b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas
- c. Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes
- d. Institution
- e. Combination of b. and d.
- f. Combination of c. and d.
- g. Other (please specify)

22. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise?

We can envisage benefits, in particular of the assessment of interdisciplinary research in moving away from units based on disciplinary areas. At the same time, we support

the continued use of careful peer review in the REF process. How this could be coordinated and moderated if units were not based on disciplinary areas is unclear to us.

23. To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)
- a. Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment
 - b. Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
 - iii. Environment
 - c. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
 - iii. Environment
 - d. Should not be used at all.
 - e. Other (please specify)

24. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

We are strongly sceptical about the use of metrics in the REF process. Even within a fairly narrow discipline, there can be wide sub-disciplinary differences in, for example, citation practices. Any move to a more metrics-driven process risks damaging reliability and robustness of REF and creating perverse incentives for institutions.

25. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?