

Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework - response form

The call for evidence is available at:

www.gov.uk/government/consultations/research-excellence-framework-review-call-for-evidence

The closing date for responses is **Thursday 24 March 2016**.

Please return completed forms to:

Hannah Ledger
Research Strategy Unit
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET

Email: REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or release to other parties or to disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes. Please see the consultation document for further information.

If you want information, including personal data, that you provide to be treated as confidential, please explain to us below why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information, we shall take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the department.

I want my response to be treated as confidential

Comments:

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Questions

Name: Ruth Meyer

Email: ruth@universities-scotland.ac.uk

Address:

Universities Scotland
106 Holyrood Road
Edinburgh
EH8 8AS

Name of Organisation (if applicable): Universities Scotland

Please check the box that best describes you as a respondent to this consultation

	Respondent type
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alternative higher education provider (with designated courses)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alternative higher education provider (no designated courses)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Awarding organisation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Business/Employer
<input type="checkbox"/>	Central government
<input type="checkbox"/>	Charity or social enterprise
<input type="checkbox"/>	Further Education College
<input type="checkbox"/>	Higher Education Institution
<input type="checkbox"/>	Individual (Please describe any particular relevant interest; teaching staff, student, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Legal representative
<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Government
<input type="checkbox"/>	Professional Body
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Representative Body
<input type="checkbox"/>	Research Council

<input type="checkbox"/>	Trade union or staff association
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please describe)

If you selected 'Individual,' please describe any particular relevant interest; teaching staff, student, etc

Comments: [Click here to enter text.](#)

If you selected 'Other,' please give details

Comments: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Universities Scotland response to Lord Stern's Review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

Section 1

The primary purpose of the REF is to inform the allocation of quality-related research funding (QR).

1. *What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

While resource allocation is an important purpose, REF is valued by institutions as a recognised quality endorsement, for providing meaningful benchmarking and enabling institutions to drive improvements. Our response should be viewed in this context.

Peer review and metrics

- Peer review is absolutely central to the goal of the REF i.e. assessing research quality, currently no metrics can replicate this ¹
- Peer review allows independent expert consideration enabling robust judgements to be made in the use of significant public resource
- Appropriate metrics could have a useful role in supporting peer review
- Care is required with the use of metrics, as these could create: perverse incentives, opportunities for gaming, disadvantage to certain staff/disciplines
- Use of citation data or journal Impact Factors to measure research quality could disadvantage interdisciplinary research, certain disciplines or outputs produced toward the end of the REF period

Minimising burden

The most efficient way to conduct the next REF is to keep it as similar as possible to REF2014. Changes will create burdens including costly changes to research management systems, opportunity costs of understanding and implementing new requirements and, potentially, significant resource to retrospectively collect data. Delaying the next REF, or extending the REF period, would contribute to minimising the burden.

Process change

To make REF more efficient, the following recommendations should be considered:

- Merge the environment and impact templates
- Improve interoperability of systems to minimise duplication in reporting

¹ The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management, July 2015

- Introduce ORCID identifiers

Impact

Scottish universities are engaged with culture change², and including impact in REF has helped it raise its profile. Culture change is a long-term process and maintaining the impact definition to be similar to REF2014 will enable HEIs to further embed change. Minimising divergence between QR and Research Council definitions of impact will support delivery. There is support for maintaining the current weighting of impact.

There is scope for broadening the definition of impact to less tightly couple to specific outputs allowing HEIs to demonstrate the extent of impact, e.g. taking into account co-creation with external partners and researcher esteem.

Focussing on impact case studies:

- There may be scope for some standard reporting approaches but this must not impact on capacity to express the breadth of impact. We identified >1600 impacts across 795 Scottish case studies³ – impact is multifaceted and this is best captured by narrative submissions.⁴
 - Case studies should be eligible for resubmission (where new impacts can be demonstrated) without detriment to the possibility of achieving the highest score
 - The date for the underpinning research should remain at 1993 – aligning with evidence about the time lag between research and impact (17 years in medical research⁵).
2. *If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

Unit of assessment structure

Members are generally supportive of the current Unit of Assessment (UoA) structure and have emphasised the importance of the current level of granularity to foster unit goals, identify centres of excellence, and areas for development. In the encouraging context of UK Government's commitment to support excellence where it is found⁶, a higher level of aggregation would risk losing sight of emerging pockets of excellence and would minimise the ability of the reviewers to take into account specific unit or

² Making It Happen: Enterprise & Entrepreneurship Education, Universities Scotland, November 2015

³ Research Impact: Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design, Universities Scotland, February 2016

⁴ The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact, King's College London and Digital Science, 2015

⁵ Medical research: what's it worth?, Academy of Medical Sciences, November 2008

⁶ Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. November 2015

discipline strengths. This level of granularity is therefore important in supporting the wider uses of the REF (outside funding allocation) as well as enabling decision making.

A more detailed consultation would have scope to discuss any refinements to the UoA structure, learning the lessons of the previous REF. However, broadly members are satisfied.

REF returns and individuals

While there are several ways of managing this issue of linkage one suggestion would be to take a portfolio approach to outputs, rather than mandating four outputs per researcher. This would allow a more team-based mechanism of providing a set outputs for a group of researchers (allowing some individuals to provide fewer outputs). It is important to strike the right balance of needs - to remove the spur for recruitment 'gaming' but enabling staff to move institutions as they would wish, all while recognising the role of both researcher and the environment/institution in producing research.

Aggregation of reporting

Members have identified advantages and disadvantages to reporting aspects of environment at a more aggregate level (but not necessarily institutional) – this may better reflect interdisciplinary environments and there may be scope for certain requirements (e.g. compliance with sectoral standards) to be accurately captured from a more aggregate level. However, concerns have been raised that aggregation of environment would reduce the capacity to highlight good practice for certain disciplines and would not reflect the specific strengths, or ability to focus research support to specific disciplines. There was also support for firmly linking environment and impact, which should be reported at the same level. On balance, there was support for maintaining the current level of reporting.

Section 2

While the primary purpose of REF is QR resource allocation, data collected through the REF and results of REF assessments can also inform disciplinary, institutional and UK-wide decision making.

3. *What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

As noted REF is important in guiding institutional decision making by providing reliable benchmarking to direct investment and support. It therefore drives research quality in institutions.

A useful development has been better linkage with the Higher Education Statistics Agency and this could be further developed to provide more information for the REF.

It has been noted that there are numerous reporting mechanisms and bodies in receipt of information from HEIs and improved data interoperability would reduce the burden on institutions. Several members have noted that the detailed information produced in the REF (e.g. sub-profiles of environment, scores for individual case studies) should be returned to the institutions to support the decision making processes in HEIs.

Institutions do collect and use management information but there have been no concerns raised that either (internal information or data for REF) diminish the other. Such management information is useful for internal purposes, including monitoring progress of institutional strategies and ensuring responsible organisation of resources. The consensus feedback is that such information is only appropriate for internal purposes, but has an additional role of supporting reporting to the REF.

4. *What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

REF does drive behaviour, and this REF will drive uptake and implementation of open access policies at cost to HEIs (including management and monitoring costs).

Although there is agreement that it would be feasible to utilise more data in the environment template and there may be scope for use of HEBCI data (as a means of demonstrating knowledge exchange activities) there were no consensus suggestions for additional data. A note of caution was flagged in relation to the potential to view productivity as simply more output, rather than a focus on quality.

Section 3

The incentive effects of the REF shape academic behaviour, such as through the introduction of the impact criteria.

5. *How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The REF already drives a number of priorities – the focus on impact drives better linking of research to its beneficial impacts and therefore incentivises researchers to undertake the appropriate methods (which may include interdisciplinary research, and other collaborations) to realise impact (the eventual goal of such behaviours).

From our work on Scottish REF2014 research impact case studies we are confident that underpinning research is often interdisciplinary and that the links between research and impact are unlikely to be linear.⁷ This does underscore the importance of a diverse research base, as well as the importance of the Haldane Principle (which

⁷ Research Impact: Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design, Universities Scotland, February 2016

UK Government has noted its commitment to)⁸. We would therefore recommend caution in introducing further drivers into this system.

In terms of making the assessment system work for interdisciplinary research (i.e. where research does not fit simply within a particular UoA) and joint submissions there was consistent feedback on the need for improvements. Specifics include:

- Ensuring a consistent approach to the use of interdisciplinary panel members or cross-referral systems for interdisciplinary research
- Creating a more user-friendly method for joint submissions
- REF2014 presented the results of joint submissions separately and in future it should be clearer that all HEIs involved in a joint submission contributed in order that they realise the full benefit of the submission

Section 4

Previous studies have focused on the costs of REF with respect to the time and resources needed for the submission and assessment processes. The Review is also interested in views and any associated evidence that the REF influences, positively or negatively, the research and career choices of individuals, or the development of academic disciplines. It is also interested in views on how it might encourage institutions to 'game-play' and thereby limit the aggregate value of the exercise.

6. In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and / or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g. success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming the system?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The positive impact of the REF is in incentivising staff to produce excellent research in their institution, as this will be validated by peer review and visible to a wide audience. As noted it also further embeds a culture of impact. The REF can be useful in influencing career decisions and recruitment by giving researchers worldwide the information to recognise excellence in their field.

The potential negative ramifications centre on the relatively short REF cycle disincentivizing long-term research projects and driving convergence to traditional outputs (publications) in order to create four outputs.

There is a diversity of views with regards to the best mechanism for submission process, which influences institutional decision making. The potential benefits of whole staff submission include avoiding resource intensive, and potentially disruptive, staff selection processes and providing a view of the totality of the research system; but the downsides would be introducing a driver to move staff onto

⁸ Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. November 2015

ineligible contract types and a greater burden of work on the Panels. Relatedly, concerns were raised about the evidence requirements for awarding a reduction in outputs and the anxiety this caused to individual members of staff – there is scope for refining the individual circumstances process.

Members highlighted the ‘gaming’ of the system via recruitment practice and the significant issues the REF ‘transfer market’ generated for institutions. Related to our comments under Question 2 (REF returns and individuals) there is a need to ensure the system credits the individual and the institutional environment by taking account of the time spent at the institution. Steps to minimise this ‘gaming’ include: eligible staff being based at an institution for a minimum period of time, where staff have moved in the REF cycle establishing a method of sharing outputs to recognise time spent elsewhere, and short term appointments (at low FTE) requiring a justification.

Please note, articulating practical recommendations within a restrictive word count is challenging; we would be able to provide further detail on suggestions raised throughout this response.

7. *In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

As noted elsewhere the REF is used to support institutional decision making, and it is important to have information at the current UoA level to track disciplines. There are specific examples of disciplines which are not well catered for in the current structure (pure mathematics, forensic sciences) which warrant further discussion. However, broadly the REF is useful in enabling HEIs to develop disciplines.

Concern has been raised that general esteem factors are insufficiently valued despite being critical foundations of the research base – for example, peer review and editorial roles, mentoring and postgraduate supervision.

Section 5

Much of REF focuses on the retrospective analysis of success achieved by institutions either through output or impact. Yet the resources provided anticipate continued success based on that track record. Are there means of better addressing forward-looking institutional plans and priorities, and how these might feed in to national policy?

8. *How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

It is vital that REF takes a retrospective view in order to have the evidence-base to make a judgement on quality of research. QR funding is critical to underpin research and allows institutions to leverage in funds so an isolated assessment of how an

institution would utilise QR would likely undervalue the enabling role of stable, predictable funding.

The other half of the dual support system supports prospective projects and there are mechanisms available via this route to drive policies which HEIs can be more responsive too. Of course the future levels of QR funding and the opportunities that might arise in the census period are unknown at the point of submission to the REF so detailed information on the use of, specifically, of QR would be difficult to provide and could also impact on institutional agility to respond to such opportunities. The value of QR is contributing to an institution's ability to pursue strategic aims in their own unique context, and this would unlikely be captured by specific projections for use of QR.

Further, the future strategy was provided in the previous REF and this is appropriate for understanding the direction of the unit, and having this peer reviewed allows for a contextualised judgement of whether the plans are desirable and feasible.

Final Thoughts

The Review is keen to hear of creative ideas and insights and to be open in its approach.

9. *Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?*

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

In our response⁹ to the recent UK Government Green Paper we raised significant concerns about the future of English QR in the proposed Research UK, and the associated abolishment of HEFCE. If such a change were to go ahead this raises concerns about where the future REF will sit. It will be important that the expertise established within HEFCE is retained, and that the independence of the assessment is maintained for future assessments. The four UK higher education funding bodies (or equivalents) should continue to work together to ensure the UK-wide assessment works for all UK research.

Future assessments must have the confidence of the wider research community – this is important for the international reputation of UK research, recruitment of the best academics and the inward investment power of our world-class research base. This will necessitate a peer review system.

In terms of the next REF exercise we would stress the burden of adapting to changes and the need for institutions to receive guidance as soon as possible. The more changes, and the less notice of those changes, the greater the costs to HEIs. Additionally, a consistent approach to REF would allow institutions to monitor change over time, and use this to identify good practice for developing disciplines. Our strong recommendation would be to minimise changes to the next REF, and that simplification is the focus of such changes. Assuming stability there is scope for

⁹ <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/contribution/response-to-uk-governments-green-paper-higher-education-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice/>

consultation around the more detailed points raised in this response (which recognises the need for prompt turnaround to the final guidance).

The development of impact case studies was a significant resource burden in REF2014. One approach to reducing burden could be to allow institutions to 'keep' existing impact scores by demonstrating the strategies in place to continue to develop impact and by updating on progress. Institutions could also have the option of submitting a full new suite of case studies to a UoA if they choose to do so.

The review terms of reference noted a role in providing options for future iterations of the REF and we would be open to discussion of a longer-term approach. There is scope to discuss a system of alternating full and lighter touch reviews, based on metrics and/or an output sampling approach (both with peer review input). The development of reliable and validated metrics will require resource commitment.

Careful consideration is required around how the REF is used to drive priorities – QR is hugely important to institutions and therefore REF is a powerful means of driving change. The approach to REF should recognise that excellent research is at the core of research success and that the REF already does, and will, drive several priorities. REF has increased the visibility of impact, encouraged more outward-focussed activity and the development of formal approaches to capturing impact, as well as driving open access. There is a balance to be struck between excellence and priorities – introducing additional focusses, at this time, may create disabling drivers in the research environment.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge receipt of individual responses unless you tick the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply

IND/16/1a

About Universities Scotland

We are a membership organisation working for the Principals and Directors of Scotland's 19 higher education institutions. We develop higher education policy and campaign on issues where our members have a shared interest.

Further information

Ruth Meyer

Senior Policy Officer, Research & Innovation

ruth@universities-scotland.ac.uk

0131 225 0705