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:

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Email: REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk

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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**

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

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**Comments:** Click here to enter text.

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**Comments:** Click here to enter text.
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:

The REF has three purposes: allocation, accountability and benchmarking. Each contributes to the quality and on-going improvement of UK research, playing a pivotal role in ensuring that the UK is a major contributor of excellent and impactful research and is recognised globally as such. The accuracy of assessment is high – both the peer review system employed by the RAE and REF and their results were trusted by the academic community and key stakeholders. There has been very little contestation of RAE/REF results. HEFCE has planned, consulted and managed the process very effectively. The total cost of REF 2014 relative to total QR distributed is low (see our Green Paper response: http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/pras/universityresponseto2015hegreenpaper/).

Metrics are not an effective proxy for research excellence in the majority of disciplines - therefore we would object to a blanket increase in use of metrics, although they may have a role to play in some disciplines. The REF should enable proper benchmarking between institutions across the sector. A requirement to submit all staff would contribute to achieving this. However, if this is to achieve a reduction in the cost and burden of the REF, there would need to be safeguards to ensure the avoidance of large scale reorganisation of contracts across the sector, and the knock on consequences for the staff involved. If a decision is taken to change the staff submission rules, loop holes around changing staff job titles, classifications or job descriptions to game the REF would have to be closed, with clear auditable trails. A second risk is that the increased volume of submissions would require sampling to assess excellence – any sampling method proposed would need the backing of the sector.

The so-called ‘transfer market’ that happens ahead of the REF census date is another area of activity and instability which causes cost and administrative burden to the sector. This might be ameliorated if publications are credited, for REF purposes, to the institution by which the academic was employed at the date of publication of the output. Were this to be adopted, special provision must be made in the next REF for early career researchers to avoid a reduction in the desirability of their employment- indeed, this might make the “transfer market” more effective for them.

The case study approach to impact and its broad definition seem appropriate and the University is largely positive about this introduction to the REF. We would not recommend a narrowing of the definition, nor would we recommend significant further changes to this area of the REF – having to do this as a largely retrospective exercise for REF 2014 brought particular challenges that we are working to alleviate by embedding processes and an infrastructure that can report or even develop clear cases of impact going forward. ‘Impact’ can mean very different things for different
disciplines and the Main Panel guidelines should give greater discretion for locally-nuanced and inclusive definitions and examples. We would welcome the use of disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) expertise as well as research outputs as the starting point for impact case studies, as appropriate to the Unit of Assessment. We would also recommend that future REF rules should allow resubmission of previous impact case studies where significant new developments and further impact have arisen. A further broadening of the impact criteria could be to enable HEIs to report on impact generated by graduate research students.

The concentration of outputs and therefore UoAs at the top of the excellence rating scale needs to be addressed in some form, either in expanding the scale or (we would recommend) in a tightening of the definitions of world-class.

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:

HEFCE defined three purposes for REF 2014; accountability for public investment, benchmarking information for the sector and the selective allocation of QR. We support these aims. Assessment in disciplinary units is a key component of REF. The assessment of outputs, in particular, should remain discipline- or field-specific. However, reducing the narrative elements could save significant time in preparation. The environment and impact statements should be merged. Assessment of ‘environment’ aspects not directly related to quality of research, and which are already monitored and accountable via other mechanisms, could be removed.

The University is largely content with the current number of UoAs, although a review of these in advance of each REF may be advisable to ensure that the UoAs used in the previous REF are still appropriate. We would argue that the assessment of individuals is perhaps less important than the assessment of the productivity of the system. The REF could be used to assess a number of papers based on the total FTE count of a UoA within an institution, rather than a fixed number per person.
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:

The process of compiling the REF submission and the way in which the submissions and results are published enables our UoAs/departments and Oxford’s academic divisions to gain some insight into areas of success and areas for growth. For the REF to be useful in our decision-making and strategic planning, it needs to, above all, support and reward planning by our Heads of Departments, since departments are where the key academic strategy is implemented. For this reason, UoAs need to be identifiably relevant to departments.

REF performance data complement but do not take priority over the other management information and approaches we use to assess research performance, including our annual planning round, department reviews and internal performance reports. REF 2014 also required the production of case studies, which we have used for external communication of impactful research. The University does not use REF submissions as a basis for staff performance review, and is committed to not doing so.

Within the University of Oxford, QR is distributed in a way that closely reflects the formula applied by HEFCE to calculate institutional allocations. The result is that QR allocations distributed to departments reflect the quality of the submissions to the relevant UoA, promoting investment in a world-leading research environment.

REF results enable HEIs to benchmark themselves against each other within the UK HEI sector, in complementing other useful benchmarking data such as comparative funding success rates and values. It is useful to have such data at a level that maps on to different disciplines, since these are usually reasonably well aligned with departments. The REF does not, of course, lend itself to international benchmarking, though this would be enhanced by an increase in the number of international academics on the review panels.

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:

We would argue that the Government’s role is to enable research excellence and productivity, rather than to ‘drive’ it. HEIs operate within a national framework of institutional autonomy and
accountability; their governing bodies and senior academic leaders are committed to research excellence, impact and productivity and employ various means to achieve and measure success.

REF could collect examples of outstanding research initiatives, or good practice in terms of inter- / multi-disciplinary research as well as collaborations between institutions (especially outside of the UK). The way in which HEFCE made REF submissions available online was particularly helpful for academics exploring these issues, and HEFCE has itself undertaken or commissioned research using the REF material.

We should also ensure that the REF includes an appropriate emphasis on quality graduate research education and training, given the influence that this will have on the UK’s future research and impact landscape.
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 shone a spotlight on ‘impact’ and provided incentives and recognition for this aspect of the academic life. Impactful research with benefits to society and the economy has been conducted at Oxford for centuries. Indeed, the generation and exploitation of knowledge is at the heart of all universities. The REF should continue to be used as a means to assess the effectiveness with which this mission is carried out, and not graft onto it other temporally mutable government policy objectives.

There is a perception that the REF is not doing enough to capture, let alone reward, top quality interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research, even to the extent that it runs the risk of hampering the development of new disciplines. It is not clear the extent to which this is reality or a perception. Research on REF 2014 has shown that in fact there is significant interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research in UK HEIs and a lot of impact arising from it.

UoA panel processes must have the confidence of the submitting institutions otherwise they will submit preferentially publications that sit safely within a discipline over novel inter- / multi-disciplinary outputs. There are a number of ways this could be addressed. The Review Group might consider specifically crediting the submission of interdisciplinary research; future research excellence assessments could collect case studies as evidence of interdisciplinary research or of cross-institutional collaborations. Submissions of interdisciplinary research output could list multiple panels for assessment, or panels could seek input from other panels in the assessment of this type of research. REF could continue to require inter- / multi-disciplinary research to be labelled as such prior to submission. The University of Oxford would favour the placement of inter- / multi-disciplinary champions on individual sub-panels as a method to ensure fair treatment of outputs of this type, and to promote their 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:

We agree that periodic national research assessment in the UK since 1986 has helped to increase the quality of research and related elements, including PGR training, intellectual property exploitation and public engagement. The significant level of funding at stake and the credibility of review (by leading UK and overseas panellists) means institutions do focus throughout the assessment period on the core success criteria, including environment, strategy, the quality of outputs and impact, With respect to outputs, the REF rightly encourages quality over quantity.

The REF promotes positive action, including in relation to recruitment and retention of excellent researchers, collaboration, quality graduate researcher experience, researcher development, and optimising the academic, economic, cultural and social benefits of research. Transparent reporting of the submissions and the results helps institutions to reflect and benchmark in ways not possible otherwise, because a common dataset is available across the sector. This enables universities to act strategically, set goals and improve against accepted national (and to some extent international) benchmarks.

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:

REF has given us explicit definitions of research quality and a mechanism by which to assess it, resulting in great improvements in the UK research sector. The introduction of ‘Impact’ to the REF assessment has positively affected the perception of the engagement of our academics and departments with the outside world. In addition, the discount in outputs required for early career researchers has proved beneficial for those starting out on the career ladder in incentivising an increase in opportunities in the research job market.
The alignment of the REF criteria with criteria that are used to assess research excellence globally and a greater involvement of international expertise in judging the research, would better serve the UK in ensuring that its universities are truly world class.
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:

We think that it is appropriate that, as research grant income should be predicated upon future work and aspirations, QR income should be based largely upon past achievements. Retrospective analysis is focused on evidence of influence and impact; forward looking analysis would most likely be based on aspirations, which could be unduly optimistic and could also exacerbate game playing across the sector even further. The REF should remain retrospective but perhaps make more provision for, and reward, a longer view on units that have sustained research quality and capacity over several assessment exercise periods. Although the REF should be retrospective as a general principle, there would be benefits to assessing the extent to which UoAs achieved the aims stated in their environment template in REF 2014.
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:

The next REF should continue to strive to afford greater freedom at discipline level to assess research excellence in discipline-specific ways, thereby better catering for distinct branches of research and the distinct ways in which the measurable aspects of research excellence are manifested. It is vital that the processes used for the next assessment are valued and accepted by the academic communities on which the outcomes impact.

An obvious cost-saving would be to reduce the frequency with which the REF is undertaken. In its present form many of our academics feel that the exercise does not allow sufficient time for more long-term research initiatives to reach maturity. However, we would not recommend reducing the frequency, as it would put greater weight on the submission process, since the funding model would be even less dynamic, and the risk of a low ranking would be mitigated by greater investment of time and resource prior to submission. Another alternative would be to have more frequent research excellence assessments to make the system more adaptable and to normalise the process in a potentially cost-saving way. One way to achieve this is to have a rolling exercise that assesses different panels in different years. This would even out the administrative burden across years and would enable institutions to maintain a core level of staffing (and continuity of institutional knowledge); there are considerable costs associated with staffing up for submission in a research-intensive institution. This could also reduce some of the surges in activity at publisher level, although not at individual journal level.

Finally, we would note that HEFCE’s requirement that publications should be deposited within three months of acceptance to qualify as open access is already causing a major administrative burden in the sector, and is likely to cause more as we run up towards the next REF. One way in which HEFCE’s Open Access Policy could be simplified and the knock-on costs to institutions reduced would be to align it with that of RCUK, and be based on publication dates rather than acceptance dates. This would reduce confusion by simplifying the message and would streamline the process.
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 ☑ ☐

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