

British Academy response to the consultation on the design of the UK's future research assessment programme

6 May 2022

Background

The four UK Higher Education Funding Bodies launched the Future Research Assessment Programme in May 2021, to consult on possible approaches to the assessment of UK higher education research performance. The programme builds on existing frameworks of assessment, seeking to demonstrate research excellence withing a positive research culture without placing a heavy administrative burden on the higher education sector.

As the national academy for the SHAPE disciplines (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy), the British Academy has responded to the consultation by emphasising the need for research assessment to represent the full breadth of the UK academic research community, across the diversity of researchers, disciplines and activity which ensure its strength. Many of the positions in this submission are derived from previous evidence submitted by the British Academy to [Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework in 2016](#), to the subsequent HEFCE consultation on the [second Research Excellence Framework in 2017](#), and evidence submitted to the [draft guidance panels and criteria in REF 2021](#).

Response

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.

Provide benchmarking information

2. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?

The Academy believes that the provision of benchmarking information could assist Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to better understand their own contextualised performance, as well as the value and impact of research across their disciplines. Such information should not be designed or encouraged for the purpose of creating hierarchies and ranking tables. The UK system is highly competitive and there is a risk that this can have unintended consequences on the health of all disciplines as institutions look to rationalise or streamline their research base to remain competitive.¹

As such it is important to have some way of identifying trends or net changes in the research community. A future exercise should therefore also allow for some level of comparability of the research community with previous exercises. The exercise should enable specific areas of strength to be identified, changes in the size of the research community to be observed, and the availability of disciplinary expertise across the UK research community to be monitored. Having some level of comparability to previous research assessment exercises is important, so that it is possible to track change over time. The strategic value of a research assessment exercise is not limited to supporting “national priorities” or tackling current challenges, as these can be subject to change over the short term for a variety of reasons.² There is a strategic value to assessing the health of the research system in the UK - across all disciplines – to ensure its strength, diversity and resilience.

3. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.

NA

4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

¹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3505/british-academy-submission-spending-review.pdf>

² <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3733/British-Academy-Submission-to-the-Nurse-Review-of-the-RDI-Landscape.pdf>

NA

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)
 1. Robustness of assessment outcomes
 2. Impact of the system on research culture
 3. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)
 4. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate
 5. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance
 6. Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.
 7. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development
 8. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing
 9. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021

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)
 1. Impact of the assessment system on research careers:
 2. Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion:
 3. Impact of the system on research integrity
 4. Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research
 5. Impact of the system on open research
 6. Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations)

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.

NA

8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

The Academy has been pleased to see and support recent endeavours in improving research culture in the UK, including through the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the Concordat on Research Integrity. It is important that future research assessment exercises coordinate and align with existing initiatives and frameworks, which themselves seek to enhance and support a positive research culture in the UK. This should include a consistency of terminology.

The Academy believes that at the core of a positive research culture is inclusivity - for researchers, disciplines and research activities. Central to promoting and protecting this inclusivity is in recognising that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not appropriate. Instead, any such assessment should recognise different types of impact and outputs - including the impact on teaching - as well as the scale of impact. As such, the increased focus on the link between staff and research students under "Environment" was a welcome addition to REF21. The Academy believes that this will provide insights into best practice in cultivating a positive research environment across the research community, including both staff and students.

A broader definition of impact and a more inclusive approach to research assessment will go some way in helping to address persistent problems in academia around fixed term contracts and opportunities for progression and promotion which have particularly negative impacts for certain groups within the research community – namely early career academics, women and those from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds.³ In addition, there is qualitative and quantitative evidence of 'spikes' in teaching-only contracts coinciding with research assessment cycles, as institutions respond to censuses of eligible academics by manipulating staffing patterns.⁴ The way in which the design of research assessment criteria can encourage such practices and the consequent negative impact both on individual academics and research culture more broadly is something which should be considered in designing future exercises with a focus on inclusivity.⁵

Such inclusivity should not be restricted to geography. The Academy believes that any future UK research assessment system should also acknowledge the importance of collaboration between researchers across disciplines and UK institutions, but also with researchers across the EU and internationally. This more dynamic, collaborative and outward looking approach to research and knowledge (as well as impact) is an important part of a positive research culture.⁶

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)

Should be moderately weighted

³ https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1940/Consultation-Response-on-Concordat-to-Support-Career-Development-of-Researcher_cjiuF8V.pdf

⁴ Forthcoming report by the British Academy on the Nexus between Teaching and Research. Expected June 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3734/British-Academy-Response-to-Delivering-a-UK-ST-Strategy.pdf>

- b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards)
Should be moderately weighted
- c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets)
Should be heavily weighted
- d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward)
Should be heavily weighted
- e. Engagement beyond academia
Should be moderately weighted
- f. Societal and economic impact
Should be moderately heavily
- g. Other (please specify).

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

We would like to acknowledge and support the recognition of Early Career Researchers as a 'circumstance' category within the current Research Excellence Framework. The Academy believes that it is important that the Impact agenda does not lose sight of early career researchers. Early career researchers report that changes to the REF are more likely to affect their expectations, both positive and negative, when compared to more established researchers.⁷The risk here is that early career researchers (in the broadest sense of the term), may be disincentivised from focusing on impact or engaging fully with this aspect of the research system, because it is harder for them to readily demonstrate impact based on smaller research portfolios and profiles. Along with other circumstances, the Academy believes that recognising the diversity in career stages, experiences and background of researchers is important.⁸

Assessment of research excellence also needs to be sensitive to disciplinary differences in inputs and outputs – including types of impact - to ensure that no discipline is at an unfairly impacted. The benchmarking of excellence should be retained as the central goal of any future assessment, but the Academy believes that this is best achieved by understanding the nuances of evidence supplied by disciplines.

Assessment criteria

11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)
- a. Originality
 - b. Significance
 - c. Rigour

Yes

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

⁷ Manville C. et al (2021) "Understanding perceptions of the research excellence framework among UK researchers" RAND Europe .

⁸ For more information, see the British Academy's Early Career Researcher Network <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/early-career-researcher-network/>

The Academy believes that often the most innovative, interesting and impactful work is happening at the margins of disciplines. Evidence gathered through the Academy's report on interdisciplinary research, *Crossing Paths*, showed that the perception that interdisciplinarity was not treated well in the REF 2014 was widespread and that the REF was perceived as a major disincentive to submitting interdisciplinary work.⁹

We were pleased to see that REF 2021 exercise has taken much of this advice and thinking onboard, and changes were encouraging to those institutions interested in submitting interdisciplinary work. The Academy would like to stress that lessons learned in past REF exercises must be recorded and remembered in order to promote trust with the community, and to ensure that future research exercises are well-informed and able to continue a trajectory of improved benchmarking. As part of such evidence, the Academy continues to stress the importance for individual panels to be able to decide whether quantitative data should inform their assessment of outputs.

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

Yes, the Academy believes that the current REF assessment criteria for impact are clear and appropriate.

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

The Academy has welcomed moves to broaden and deepen the definition of impact over recent years, noting that impact is often achieved through the networks and relationships - a 'web of influence' - rather than through linear progression. There has also been sustained criticism of the "linear model" of research and innovation with its emphasis on traditional science and technology indicators.¹⁰

In particular, we would stress the importance that any future research assessment programmes continue to move away from a 'but for' model of impact causation which implies certainty as to the cause of an impact. This model was used in REF2014 and is not applicable to the whole range of wider benefits of research, particularly in SHAPE.¹¹ Instead, it is critical that we recognise how research that generates and critiques ideas can be long term and its effects and impacts diffuse, and is not always conducive to demonstrating that an outcome happened 'because of' a singular or particular piece of research. The Academy supports an approach to research impact based on a body of research, knowledge and expertise.

As part of which, the Academy believes that concepts of reach and significance are appropriate for the measurement of Impact.¹² Both these concepts can help to better understand the

⁹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/crossing-paths/>

¹⁰ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/journal-british-academy/9/understanding-rd-in-arts-arts-humanities-social-sciences/>

¹¹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2511/BA-response-second-REF-consultation-2017.pdf>

¹² <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2511/BA-response-second-REF-consultation-2017.pdf>

relative impact of research with respect to the institution, location or discipline. In particular, the concept of reach is pertinent to the current government's levelling up agenda, and offers one source of evidence to support analysis this or similar government initiatives.¹³

However, the Academy believes that the weighting for Impact should not be increased higher than it was in REF 2021. REF should continue to focus primarily on assessing outputs and the weighting should reflect this. It is legitimate for government to require the UK research base to be accountable for the very significant investment that government makes in research. Introducing the measurement of 'Impact' to REF2014 focussed universities on the need for public accountability for funding.¹⁴ It revealed the substantial work that universities do that brings wider benefits to the economy, society and quality of life in the UK. Impact now plays a proportionate role in the research assessment process. But if it were to be further increased this would put pressure on other aspects of the exercise, potentially undermining the other key objectives of the exercise.

15. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate?

(Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Vitality
- b. Sustainability

Yes

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

The Academy supports the inclusion of an institution's approach to supporting and enabling impact to be captured as a specific element of the institutional-level environment statement. This should ensure that the follow-through from research to wider benefit is encouraged, supported and facilitated as part of the overall management of research.¹⁵

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.

Both a. and b.

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

There is clearly a balance to be struck between the two here. If the REF becomes too infrequent then the reliability of the evidence diminishes. It is also unfair on researchers and institutions who are starting from a less developed research base to have large gaps of time between research exercises, and potentially inhibits development as recognition (and funding) are not responsive enough to changes in the research landscape. On the other hand, too great a frequency of assessment becomes burdensome for researchers and research institutions,

¹³ Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (2022) "Levelling Up the UK" <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

¹⁴ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2511/BA-response-second-REF-consultation-2017.pdf>

¹⁵ https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/315/BA_response_to_REF2021_Panel_Guidance.pdf

meaning that excessive levels of resource are dedicated to bureaucracy (rather than research). This scenario does not get the best out of the research system and could even stifle innovation in some areas, rather than supporting it.

The currency of information provided by a research assessment exercise depends upon the overall objectives of the exercise itself. If one of the objectives is to provide an analysis not just across the sector but also across time, then there is a need for some level of consistency across different research exercises. Moreover, in connection with the point made above about bureaucracy, for many organisations, and this is particularly true of smaller institutions, stability partly derives from consistency in process and what is being asked of them.

Sequencing

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.

No.

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

The Academy would discourage a continual exercise for assessment, due to the high level of burden it would place on researchers and institutions, taking focus away from research activities. Any such assessment exercise may also be more reliant on quantitative metrics which are not equal across disciplines.

Granularity

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)

Combination of b. and d.

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

NA

Metrics

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)

Other

The Academy would support an adapted, and nuanced approach to C. the use of standardised metrics to inform peer review. Quantitative indicators are a useful tool that can be used within a research assessment framework where appropriate to inform Peer Review. Indeed, it is important to emphasise that quantitative indicators should only be a tool at the disposal of the panel/decision makers, who can decide on the extent to which these are factored in. The robustness of quantitative indicators will vary across different disciplines, so should be treated with caution.¹⁶ Peer review should remain the central pillar of any UK research assessment exercise. The reasons for this are not just practical. The peer review system, while onerous on those involved, is a distinguishing feature of the UK research landscape and one that makes element that helps to reinforce its reputation as a world-leading system of higher education.¹⁷

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

NA

Burden

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

One way to mitigate against the level of bureaucratic burden placed on institutions and researchers would be to provide early confirmation of timetables and early dissemination of other relevant information related to any future research assessment exercise. This gives institutions more time to prepare and allocate resource internally. Furthermore, clear (and concise) information and guidance that can be provided by the organisation overseeing the exercise will help to mitigate against the level of bureaucratic burden for individuals and institutions. The key here may be quality over quantity, as providing the sector with limitless amounts of information and guidance on the exercise can itself create more burden for those managing submissions at institutions.

The burden associated with the REF is an issue that is raised across networks of the British Academy, usually by (or in reference to) the smaller and more specialised disciplines and organisations. However there clearly is a level of information and guidance that will be helpful for the sector, and in particular those smaller institutions or individual researchers, in helping

¹⁶ <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/RE-151221-TheMetricTideFullReport2015.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3734/British-Academy-Response-to-Delivering-a-UK-ST-Strategy.pdf>

to reduce their workload and increase the efficiency with which they can engage in the exercise. Consistency with previous research assessment exercises also helps those writing and administering submissions. But this itself should not prevent any reform.

In terms of reducing the actual level of burden that is placed on those engaging in the exercise, those designing the exercise should look to draw on readily available data and evidence where suitable in order to minimise the need for new and additional data and evidence to be submitted by individuals and institutions.