

Review of research assessment

- This paper seeks RKEC's perspectives on the development of a UK workplan considering future approaches to the assessment of HEIs' research.

Recommendations

- Discuss, and advise the executive on: aspects of REF 2021 of particular interest for evaluation; and key elements/directions in working toward a desirable approach to future research assessment

Financial implications

- No direct financial implications

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Purpose

1. This paper seeks RKEC's perspectives on the development of a UK workplan considering future approaches to the assessment of HEIs' research.

Background

2. In each of the four nations of the UK, the distribution of core institutional funding for research is informed by the results of a common Research Evaluation Framework (REF). The REF (and its predecessor exercises) is run by the four UK Funding Bodies as a joint exercise.
3. Each Research Assessment Exercise/Evaluation Framework has been subject to evaluation (e.g. [Evaluation of REF 2014](#)) which has fed into the design of subsequent exercises. In addition to the business as usual evaluation of REF 2014, in 2015, the UK Government (BEIS) commissioned Lord Stern to lead an independent review of the REF. This review was [published](#) in July 2016 and its recommendations have influenced the design of REF 2021.
4. As with previous exercises, there is an ongoing programme of review of REF 2021. This includes a real-time review (pilot report [here](#), final report expected this summer), panel reports and examination of the impact of changes implemented for REF 2021.
5. In addition work has begun on exploring potential alternative approaches, primarily led by [Research England](#), with the involvement of the other UK funding bodies. The RAND report on the [Future of Research Assessment](#) is part of this package.
6. The publication of the UK Government's R&D roadmap in July 2020 referred to aspirations to be delivered for university research in England, but working closely with UKRI and the devolved administrations, "... when we evolve the Research Excellence Framework after the current exercise is complete ...".
7. The BEIS Minister for Science, Research & Innovation, Ms Solloway, confirmed this intention in a letter to Mr Lochhead in October 2020: "I am very conscious, of course, that the evaluation of the performance of the research base is a responsibility of the Governments across the UK, and that the REF is taken forward and administered on the basis of agreement and close working between the HE funding bodies across the UK. It plays an important role for each of our Governments in underpinning the allocation of institutional quality-related research funding. I remain committed to a rigorous assessment of research excellence and to the system of dual support. With this in mind, I will be keen to work closely with you as we consider how the REF should evolve

after REF2021. Clearly any plans for reform need to be taken forward by the funding bodies working together”. This was followed up with a request to Research England “to initiate a review of the REF, working in conjunction with the UK higher education funding bodies, ... and with the extensive input of researchers, initiate reform to be implemented after the REF 2021 exercise”.

8. Our Minister has welcomed these requests as consistent with existing Scottish assumptions on planning the future of research assessment.

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9. The four UK Funding Bodies are currently establishing a joint REF Evaluation Programme Board, made up of officers from each organisation, with the chair rotating and with scope to seek external advice as appropriate. This Board will oversee:

- The evaluation of REF 2021.
- Consideration of future approaches to research assessment.

Work on setting agendas for the future of research assessment is firming up just now. An evaluation plan will be drafted for publication. RKEC’s views on the development of this work will therefore be timely and welcome.

10. This work will not impact on the operation of REF 2021.

Evaluation of REF 2021

11. The elements of REF 2021 resulting from the Stern recommendations will be evaluated, as will other design changes and impacts on the sector. RKEC is invited to provide views on elements of particular interest.

The future of research assessment

12. RKEC are invited to discuss key elements/directions in working toward a desirable approach to future research assessment. Issues to consider might include:
 - Can we reduce the burden of research assessment while maintaining confidence in the assessment?
 - What aspects of modern research culture need to be taken into account in any refreshed approach to research assessment? Are any of these particular to Scotland?
 - What risks should be monitored, and what benefits should be protected, in developing a fresh approach to research assessment?
 - Can a research assessment system be sufficiently flexible to respond to the continued evolution of research practice?

- How far can a research assessment process, particularly one which informs funding, be neutral? Should we continue to seek positive impacts from the assessment process?

Risk assessment

13. The UK Funding Bodies' have jointly stated that the policy aim for research assessment is to secure the continuation of a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum within UK higher education. The purpose of the REF is described as:
 - To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment.
 - To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information.
 - To inform the selective allocation of funding for research.
14. In Scotland, the REF informs the annual allocation of REG A (£173M in AY 2020-21) and drives the behaviour of HEIs in their use of REG.
15. There is no immediate risk in the proposal to examine approaches to research assessment. Proposals arising from this review will be examined to identify any risks to achieving the strategic purpose of core research funding.

Equality and diversity assessment

16. Consideration of equality and diversity issues has been an intrinsic part of REF 2021 and will be a distinguishable element of evaluation work. Any policy proposals arising from this work will be equality impact assessed.

Financial implications

17. No direct financial implications.

Recommendations

18. The Committee is invited to discuss, and advise the executive on:
 - Aspects of REF 2021 of particular interest for evaluation.
 - Key elements/directions in working toward a desirable approach to future research assessment.

Publication

19. This paper will be published on the Council website.

Further information

20. Contact: Morag Campbell, Assistant Director, R&I (0131 313 6530, mcampbell@sfc.ac.uk).