

Briefing paper: REF2021 and Development Research

The Research Excellence Framework is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies to assess the quality and impact of research in UK higher education institutions. It was used to inform the selective allocation of £10.2 bn of funding to institutions for 2015-21, provides benchmarking information and provides accountability for public investment in research.¹ The next round of the REF is planned for 2021, with a [consultation currently underway](#) about proposed changes.

This briefing provides a summary of the REF2014 process and proposed changes in REF2021 of particular relevance to development research such as interdisciplinarity and definitions of impact. This paper serves as background reading for the event 'Defining and assessing impact in the new funding landscape for development research', hosted by UKCDS on 25 January 2017.

1. REF 2014: Process and Classification

The REF used 36 Unit of Assessment expert sub-panels working under the leadership of four main panels to review submissions. The assessment elements in REF2014 were weighted as follows:

- **Outputs:** assessed of the quality of submitted research outputs in terms of their 'originality, significance and rigour' - **65%** of the assessment
- **Impact:** REF2014 was the first time that the impact of research was assessed based on the 'reach and significance' of impacts on the economy, society and/or culture that were underpinned by excellent research (minimum 2*) conducted in the submitted unit - **20%** of the assessment (originally intended to be 25% but reduced due to being the first time that impact had been assessed)
- **Research Environment:** assessed in terms of its 'vitality and sustainability'- **15%** of the assessment

The outputs and impact case studies were assessed according to the following criteria (for more detail on the assessment of impact see Annex 1):

Classification	Outputs	Impact case studies
4*	Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour	Outstanding impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
3*	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.	Very considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
2*	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.	Considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
1*	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.	Recognised but modest impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Unclassified	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research.	The impact is of little or no reach and significance; or the impact was not eligible; or the impact was not underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitted unit.

¹ Technopolis, [REF Accountability Review: Costs, benefits and burden](#) (2015). p.1 and p.4

2. REF 2014: Outcomes and challenges

Outputs

The UK system places a greater emphasis on the quality of research outputs and assigns more funding via competitive research assessment than other countries.² Greater than 10% of UK universities' funding depends on the quality of their research outputs, compared to ~5% elsewhere.² The UK uses a non-linear calculation for funding allocations, purposely concentrating resources on the 'best' research.²

- The REF aims to assess all forms of research output across all disciplines on a fair and equal basis. It is specified that panels will not make use of "journal impact factors" or the perceived standing of the publisher.³
- 119,151 research outputs were submitted, with 30% judged "world-leading" (4*) and 46% judged "internationally excellent" (3*⁴). Examples of the classification profiles of research outputs are shown in Figure 1.
- Panel C (Geography, social sciences, economics, archaeology etc) noted an increase in thematic or issue-based research, such as on health inequalities, which drew on a common intellectual framework but did not fit obviously into any discipline.⁵

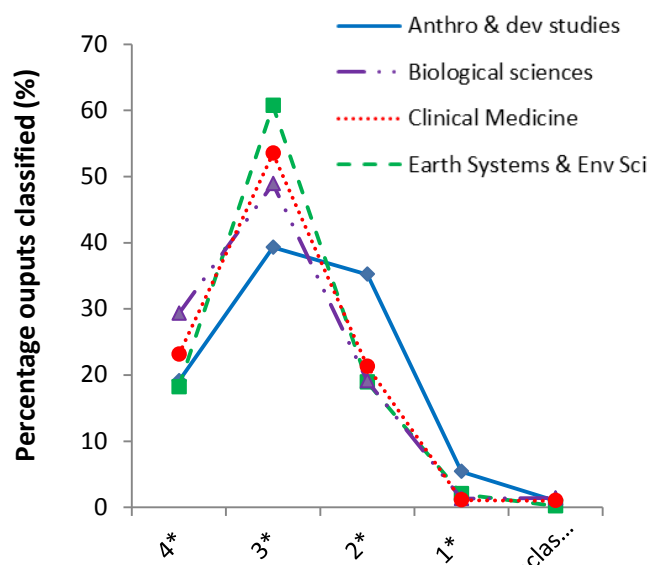


Figure 1: Outputs

Impact Case Studies

Nearly 7000 impact case studies were submitted, with 44% judged "outstanding" (4*) and 40% judged "very considerable" (3*³). 287 were identified in work by KCL to be relevant to international development.⁶

- Assessment panels were impressed by the quality and breadth of research impacts described and felt that the process enabled them to assess impact fairly and robustly.⁷
- Overall the profile of classification of case studies across Panels B, C and D were similar (Figure 2). UoAs in Panel A (medicine and biological sciences) generally had a higher percentage of case studies classified as 4*.
- The REF has begun to influence cultural change in HEIs with increased strategic thinking and processes for maximising and evidencing the impact of research.⁸

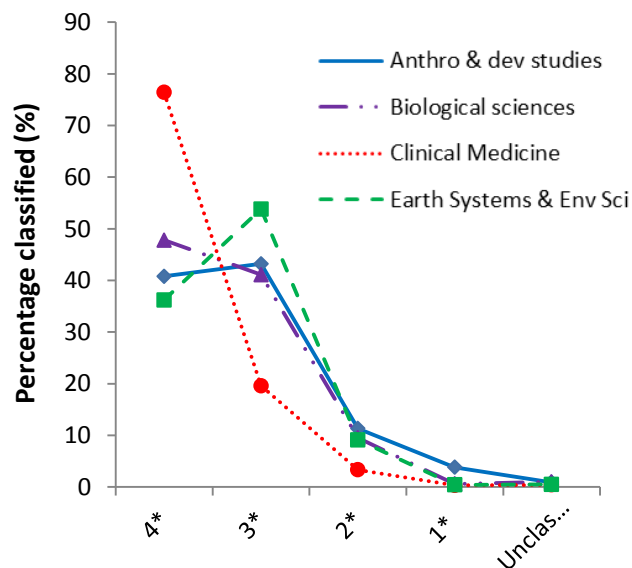


Figure 2: Impact Case Studies

² [Building on Success and Learning from Experience: An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework](#) (2016). p.46-49

³ REF2014, [Panel criteria and working methods](#) (2012). p.8

⁴ REF2014, [Sector and main panel average results](#). Accessed 17/01/16

⁵ REF2014, [Overview report by Main Panel C and Sub-panels 16 to 26](#) (2015). p.13

⁶ KCL, [The non-academic impact of international development research in UK HE](#) (2015)

⁷ RAND Europe, [Assessing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation](#) (2015)

⁸ RAND Europe, [Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation](#) (2015)

Several issues were raised about the assessment of impact by panellists and HEIs,^{6,7} summarised below.

Issue	Details	Who?
Consistency in evaluating impact	Difficulty in classifying case studies based on four-point scale and drawing grade boundaries consistently. Challenges were also expressed in assessing scoring of middle bands of impact (2* and 3*).	Panellists
Some types of impact were particularly difficult to measure and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy changes, where original research is not always referenced in documentation and many influences could lead to the action taken. • International impacts where research users outside the UK had to be involved and provide evidence to meet the requirements. • Cultural impacts and improvements to people's lives where there is not an obvious baseline, and data from research projects are not routinely collected. • Evidence of something not happening, for example a product not being used or policy not being implemented. • Public engagement impacts. • Unpopular but important research where research users would not acknowledge or recognise that the research has been important. <p>Panellists noted fewer examples of these types of impact, potentially because they were difficult to quantify. HEIs noted that the definition of impact and requirement to provide evidence to support claims meant that the impact case studies submitted were not representative of the full research impact generated by HEIs.</p>	Panellists HEIs
Understanding of 'reach' and 'significance' of impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panellists found it harder to compare case studies that had one, the other or both. • Harder to assess impact where it was local rather than international. • HEIs wanted more detail on comparisons between different types of impacts e.g. would a cure for a disease warrant a higher impact score than a diagnostic tool 	Panellists HEIs
Engagement with research users	Variety of opinions on use of testimonials. Research users stressed it was essential to have the beneficiaries' feedback on how research had impacted on them. HEIs were concerned about the burden and impact on relationships from requesting user testimonials and challenges of accessing confidential information.	Panellists HEIs
Assessing 2* level of underpinning work	Panellists noted more difficulties in assessing 2* level where research spanned disciplines. Several panellists thought that too much emphasis was put on the importance of the underlying research being 2*.	Panellists (not HEIs)
Verifying links between research and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to assess public or policy engagement for a 'high-impact individual' or team rather than a particular piece of work. • Issues of attribution and no differentiation based on the contribution of HEIs or individuals to achieving the stated impact. 	Panellists
Lack of consistency in reporting data	Suggestions from panellists that more standardised numerical measures could be used (e.g. quality adjusted life years (QALYs), patents, industrial income, audience appreciation index etc.).	Panellists
Impact on funding landscape	Concerns that funding and activity could be directed towards areas that can more easily demonstrate impact. E.g. assessing "action research" proved difficult in REF2014 so may lead to less of this type of activity	HEIs

3. Stern Review

The Independent Review of the REF, chaired by Lord Nicholas Stern,² reported in July 2016 with recommendations on the principles that should shape future REF exercises. The review considered that a substantial reinvention of the REF would increase uncertainty, workload and burden at a challenging time for UK higher education. It agreed that the processes used to assess research excellence – including measures of output, impact and environment – have, broadly, delivered well to improve quality.

4. REF 2021: Proposed changes and consultation

The [consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework](#) sets out proposed changes for REF2021. The deadline for input is 12pm GMT, 17 March 2017. Key proposals and questions raised in the consultation and relevant to development research are highlighted below, for further detail see Annex 2.⁹

Research outputs (65%)

Staff, outputs and portability: proposed that all research-active staff should be submitted, with the total number of outputs assessed maintained at similar levels to REF2014. Outputs should not be portable and should only be submitted by the HEI that employed the individual when the output was accepted for publication.

Interdisciplinarity: a range of further measures are proposed to facilitate interdisciplinary research activity. These include appointment of interdisciplinary ‘champions’ within sub-panels, mandated use of the ‘interdisciplinary identifier’ flag, and an explicit section in the environment template.

Assessment: peer review, informed by metrics such as field-weighted citation impact where appropriate, should continue to be the primary method of output assessment. Main panels will include international members and those with experience of commissioning and using research.

Impact (20%)

Definition: align REF and RCUK definitions of impact, stressing that impact on public engagement and understanding, cultural life, academic impacts outside the field, and teaching, are all eligible.

Underpinning research: Broaden the range of underpinning research linked to impact case studies that is eligible to include outputs, broader research activity or bodies of work. Questions remain around classification of underpinning research and whether rigour should be the only threshold criteria.

Continuing impact: should impact that was returned in REF2014 and still delivering impact be allowed? How would additionality be demonstrated?

Case study template: case studies to be submitted via an online form. Should further optional fields be included, such as name of research funder, to facilitate the analysis of case studies?

Institutional impact: 10-20% of total case studies should be submitted as institutional case studies to showcase interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts.

Research Environment (15%)

Environment template: New sections will include additional credit for open access and management of research data. Each HEI will also submit an institutional environment statement complementing those at UoA level, capturing aspects of strategy, support and actions of the university as a whole.

Collaboration: How can more recognition be given to universities’ collaborations beyond higher education? E.g. data on staff mobility with non-academic organisations.

Key questions :

- Will the research quality and impact criteria used in REF2021 enable the full value and range of international development research to be assessed?
- Are there particular practical, ethical or equity issues for international development research that need to be considered when evidencing impact?

⁹ Drawing on [summary document](#) produced by University of Sheffield and REF consultation document.