

UKRI consultation on Future Research Assessment
Response from the Chartered Association of
Business Schools

6th May 2022

Question 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.

Response: All of the purposes listed at a) to d) should be reflected by any future research assessment exercise.

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

Response: We believe that a future research assessment exercise should have several additional purposes beyond those listed at a) to d) in the previous question.

- The assessment should promote EDI across the sector, helping create a fair playing field for all types of staff, including Early Career Researchers. Furthermore, REF should also be used to collect information on groups that may at present be marginalised within the research community, ideally including the opportunity to consider intersectional dynamics in the ability to fully engage in research activity.
- The exercise could identify research that demonstrates a local or regional focus, including evidence of engagement with stakeholders.
- It would be worth covering in a future exercise evidence of research informed teaching which could potentially link the TEF and REF.
- Institutions' contributions towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be factored into future assessment exercises so that research on sustainability is encouraged and assessed.

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

Response: It is difficult to envision an alternative to a national research assessment system that could achieve all of the intended purposes outlined by UKRI, but if the purpose of the system is to offer an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities, it should be recognised that universities are well-placed to support this. Reducing the administrative burden involved in the current assessment system would be a key driver for any alternative approach and could entail making more use of existing data sources and/or data reported for other purposes.

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

Response: Although the importance of the research assessment system and its intended purposes is acknowledged, we think it would be worth evaluating the difference that previous assessments have made in terms of research quality and the effective use of public funds for research. We are keen to see the administrative burden of the system reduced if possible, but the quality and validity of the exercise is most important.

The disciplines covered by Chartered ABS member schools have long-standing concerns over relevance and this should be an important consideration for future assessments. The connection between funded research and relevance to broader social or economic considerations should enable real-world impact. However, linking research to national priorities should not be at the exclusion of blue sky research. It would be worth articulating how any new research assessment system could link with the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA).

Question 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).

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

Question 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).

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

Question 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.

Response: The costs and administrative burden of participating in a research assessment exercise should feature prominently on the list of considerations for any new system. Many research staff have heavy teaching loads in addition to being expected to deliver research. Though perhaps unintended, such is the reputational and financial consequence of REF that significant time is spent planning, auditing, and preparing for each round of the exercise. This is exacerbated by the adjustment of criteria and/or weightings at each exercise. Time spent reporting on research is time not spent doing research. We would also like to see some thought as to how a new research system could adopt a more collaborative focus both internally (through increased consideration of research environment) and externally (e.g. in relation to inter-departmental teamwork, cross-institutional research, and the development of knowledge exchange, partnerships, etc. with non-HEI organisations). In conjunction with the British Academy of Management (BAM), we believe that a team-based rather than an individual approach to research assessment would also help to alleviate

the pressures to publish that the REF places on individual researchers. These pressures are particularly acute for Early Career Researchers (including those who transition to research mid-career following a period in practice who are in effect early in a new research career though chronologically mid-late career). Such individuals often juggle multiple activities in addition to research. We also share BAM's concerns that the REF submission deadline every 7-8 years, combined with the definition of ECR status can create a decisive cut-off point that has significant career implications for PhD candidates and ECRs.

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

Response: A more positive research culture could be facilitated by a future research assessment system if it were to encourage collaboration, diversity, inclusivity, and be grounded in a less competitive ethos than previous assessment exercises. Within the environment statement there could perhaps be a greater expectation for institutions to demonstrate how their research culture supports diversity and inclusion, particularly in the development and maintenance of research careers. To gain the trust and credibility of the research community, the system needs to have both reliability and validity in addition to safeguards against gaming. A future system could be more constructive if, following the publication of the outcomes more specific, actionable feedback was offered. This could take the form of a best practice guide and/or detailed feedback on the relative strengths/weaknesses of research culture at institutional and unit of assessment levels. This would help inform institutional discussions of what a good research culture looks like.

Question 9. Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?

a. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers)

Response: Should be moderately weighted

b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards) **Response:** Should be moderately weighted

c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets) **Response:** Should be moderately weighted

d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward) **Response:** Should be moderately weighted

e. Engagement beyond academia **Response:** Should be heavily weighted

f. Societal and economic impact **Response:** Should be heavily weighted

g. Other (please specify). **Response:** Capacity building

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

Response: We feel that the various components of research excellence should be incrementally adjusted to reduce the burden associated with developing returns to a future assessment exercise. However, impact should retain or increase its existing high weighting whilst we would note that social and economic impacts can be more difficult to measure within social science research and this should be recognised. Furthermore, there is a risk that the existing heavy weightings for outputs can

result in perverse incentives where finding the 'right' projects to achieve peer-reviewed publication in high citation outlets takes precedent over an institution devoting attention to improving their research environment. Here we share the same view as BAM that the current approach by which impact cases are assessed encourages competition rather than collaboration between institutions. We therefore consider it worth making impact cases both portable and submissible collaboratively by more than one institution and/or UoA subject to clear articulation of individual/group contributions.

Question 11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate?

- a. Originality **Response:** Yes
- b. Significance **Response:** Yes
- c. Rigour **Response:** Yes

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

Response: More guidance could be provided as to the interpretation of the criteria. This is particularly important given the absence of feedback/confirmation of the ratings of individual outputs. Given the breadth of the disciplines in our member schools, the overwhelming tendency to return traditional, peer-reviewed journal articles in previous assessments is notable. If originality is to be retained as one of the assessment criteria then it would benefit from a broader and more accommodating definition next time around so that certain more novel types of scholarship are not disincentivised.

Again, this is a point of consensus with BAM and we suggest that Impact Cases should be portable as they require sustained work and develop over longer time periods, often based around individual relationships which move when the individual moves institution. To ensure that policy impact is adequately measured, the Impact criteria could be extended to the number of mentions of a piece of research in a government policy document, for example. We also concur with BAM that there should be some scope for the REF to recognise outputs that demonstrate engagement with different stakeholder groups as collaboration can be an important driver of impactful research.

Question 13. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate?

- a. Reach **Response:** Yes
- b. Significance **Response:** Yes

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

Response: The guidance could reinforce the view that local impacts are very welcome and 'reach' does not necessarily need to have a geographical imperative. Our members felt that the REF criteria for assessing impact is somewhat restrictive and could be broadened to encourage scholarship of sectors and organisations that are less typically studied. In addition, it was suggested that a future assessment should permit the use of some forms of secondary data to evaluate impact. Finally, consideration should be given to the time, effort and challenges associated with documenting/evidencing impact, particularly in larger UoA submissions where significant numbers of cases are curated over an extended period.

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

a. Vitality **Response:** Don't Know

b. Sustainability **Response:** Yes

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

Response: Although equality and diversity was an aspect which had to be reported upon with the research Environment statement, future assessment exercises should pay particular attention to this given the underrepresentation of women, other under-represented groups in academia, and the intersectional aspects of the characteristics being monitored.

Question 17. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:

Response: c. both a. and b.

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

Response: There should be some consideration as to how the prioritisation of stability versus currency incentivises or disincentivises the scope to experiment, take risks, and be innovative in research. The need for currency of information should of course be balanced against the administrative burden that collecting more frequent data would place on providers.

Question 19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?

Response: No

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

Response: Conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis was not seen as desirable by our membership. This would likely result in an artificial system in which research staff are always concentrating on responding to the research assessment exercise rather than conducting actual research. This would increase the stress and workload burden on academic staff, and consume scarce research resources. In addition, conducting good research takes time and spacing out the exercises to six or seven year intervals gives researchers some breathing space and encourages boundary spanning, paradigm challenging research. Our members would like to see earlier confirmation of the date, assessment criteria, and guidelines for a future assessment exercise. The historic pattern of confirming the basis of future exercises part way through the assessment period was not felt to be helpful, particularly to those responsible for recruitment, career development, etc.

Question 21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?

Response: e. Combination of b. and d. (UoA and institution)

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

Response: We are in favour of assessment at the combined level of Unit of Assessment (disciplinary areas) and institution. An approach purely at the level of institution may inadvertently conceal pockets of excellence in certain disciplinary areas, and an assessment focused solely on individual

researchers could have a very negative effect on research culture and would not be in alignment with the ethos of diversity and inclusivity that we would like to see embedded throughout the research community.

Question 23. To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises?

Response: Due to the limitations of quantitative indicators, particularly in a number of the sub-disciplines which our member schools cover, we do not advocate a metric-only or metric heavy assessment process. Striking an appropriate balance between quantitative indicators and peer review will be very important to maximising the effectiveness of any new approach to research assessment but critically, the focus should not be on re-assessing editorial decisions made in peer-review processes up to 6 or 7 years earlier.

Question 24. What role should standardised metrics play in the assessment of each of the criteria listed below?

Response: Standardised metrics should inform peer review not replace it.

Question 25. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

Response: We think that metrics have a role to play but as mentioned these and other quantitative indicators should inform rather than replace or dilute peer review. Reconsidering the balance between inviting UoAs to put forward the most ground-breaking, influential or impactful research (perhaps in categories such as theoretical development, impactful research, co-produced research, multidisciplinary research, etc.) might reduce the overall reading burden for panels and consequently reduce the workload associated with preparing a return. The current system of 2.5 outputs per person on average generated a number of unusual dynamics and expectations could be expressed more straightforwardly. The use of pre-existing datasets may also help to reduce the amount of data that must be submitted by institutions.

Question 26. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?

Response: There are several ways to make the administrative burden of research assessment more proportionate in future. There could be more use of technology to streamline the process and a platform could be used that would allow for real-time uploading of material which could then be edited prior to the final submission deadline. Different UK funding bodies could be encouraged to use the same platforms or templates so there is a degree of standardisation.

Some of the technocratic rules required for outputs, staff, and impact to be included in a submission need to be reviewed, and UKRI could perhaps consider abandoning targets for outputs per individual staff members and switch to outputs based on a collective team (see response to Q25).

If changes are to be made, the schedule and format of any future system should be published early, and UKRI should avoid asking questions that duplicate information that has already been provided by institutions. Importantly, we believe that the administrative burden incurred by REF, TEF and KEF should be assessed holistically in recognition of the cumulative impact on institutions. We would

also suggest that consideration is given to the principles for reducing research bureaucracy as outlined in Adam Tickell's very useful '*Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy*¹'.

About the Chartered ABS

The Chartered ABS is the voice of the UK's business and management education sector and our members consist of 120 business schools and higher education providers across the UK, as well as affiliate stakeholders, corporate members and international partners. The UK's business and management education sector represents 1 in 5 university students and contributes £3.25bn to the UK economy. Its management students go on to lead global businesses and its entrepreneurs contribute to our dynamic economy. Its research has an impact across society and helps to turn our capacity for invention into viable businesses.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1046070/independent-review-of-research-bureaucracy-interim-report.pdf