

University of Sussex

Feedback on the REF

May 2014

We are pleased to be able to provide the following feedback on the REF.

1. What, in your view, are the most important features of REF 2014 for higher education institutions? Why?

The effects of the publication and use of the results and the funding that subsequently flows as a consequence of the REF, as from its predecessors, are well known. These are clearly important, both in direct funding terms, and also in reputation effects.

In addition, the REF provides a mechanism by which institutions are able to review and assess their research activity and performance. The existence of the submission process therefore encourages institutions to be actively engaged with the content of their research, to an extent that might not otherwise be the case. This should be a positive effect, for example by highlighting areas or individuals where additional support or investment may be worthwhile, or where cross-institutional links may be productive. Of course, one also needs to ensure that such a process does not unduly distort the research portfolio, or become a purely monitoring exercise.

The inclusion of impact created a level of disruption and unease, but it also provided a means to find out about a whole range of beneficial effects arising from an institution's research, and not just that which was finally submitted. The effect of this could be significant and far-reaching, in terms of improving (internally and externally) the understanding of how research benefits society, in the widest sense, but also how institutions choose to support their range of research. The latter could be beneficial, as long as it did not lead to short-termism.

2. In relation to preparing REF submissions, what positive reflections do you have on the process? Why?

As noted in response to Q1, the process has enabled the University and its constituent Schools and Departments to gain an understanding of the breadth and depth of its research, and of the activity and plans of individuals and groups. Whilst this happens through other institutional processes, the REF provides a singularly research focus applied to the whole institution at the same time.

Many of the impact case studies have demonstrated very interesting effects and outcomes. The material for the case studies was certainly the most interesting part of the submission to read. The breadth of the definition of impact was helpful, as was the level of guidance material (even if not all those involved adequately read and understood that material). It was also helpful that the selected cases did not need to be representative of all areas of research within a given Unit's submission; to do so would have been unworkable.

3. In relation to preparing REF submissions, which aspects of the process were challenging? Why?

The requirement to select outputs, and hence members of staff, continues to raise challenges. This has been slightly heightened in this REF (but perhaps not to the extent some commentators would suggest) by the sector's prior knowledge that only 3* and 4* work would be funded, thus encouraging lesser work not to be included. The boundaries of the

assessment are and will always be grey, and hence the judgement of the quality of a piece of work can become contentious. A future process that removes the need to select individuals (as opposed to outputs) could remove one of the largest areas of disagreement in the process.

The inclusion of the mechanism to accommodate individual circumstances seems to have been beneficial, in terms of the relative inclusion rates of those with protected characteristics. However, the level of effort involved, for the individuals and those making the assessments, seems to have been disproportionate, and significantly increased the burden of the exercise. In addition to the required effort, there were also emotional effects for some of the individuals, who would have preferred not to have disclosed and discussed their conditions to the extent required, which on some occasions caused them distress.

There were also issues at a level of detail that seemed to be contradictory (e.g. between the Panel Criteria and the FAQs) or unreasonable (e.g. any period working in Higher Education, regardless of the nature of the employment). Further thought should be given to the practice of using the FAQs to extend the guidance, rather than merely to aid interpretation; formally, one's point of reference was the Guidance, and yet the FAQs (which one did not have to read) introduced new information on occasion. A better (but still simple) criterion for identifying the starting point as an independent researcher is an example where much time was spent trying to establish if and when independence commenced, especially given the need to use recruitment materials as part of the evidence. A more flexible allowance for complex circumstances would have helped to ensure equality between acute and chronic conditions, as the latter were harder to evidence satisfactorily.

The Environment statement risks becoming a place where a range of topics need to be addressed as much from a regulatory stance as from a constructive, developmental position. This could make it more perfunctory and less useful, to either the Unit or the Panel.

The submission system was a (further) improvement on the previous one, but would have benefited from greater reporting capabilities, in particular to include summary reports at Unit and institutional levels.

4. Please describe any benefits you identify in participating in the REF for your institution.

As noted in responses to Q1 and Q2, there have been positive effects in making more transparent the current research and its non-academic effects. We have made use of the impact case studies, and have started converting them into publicly-facing material, which we will use to enhance our profile and as marketing collateral with potential customers and funders of our research and expertise.

The periodic basis of the REF means that the University needs to undertake research reviews, in the broadest sense, in between REFs, with the REF providing some of the framework for such reviews.

5. Please describe any negative implications you identify in participating in the REF for your institution.

The need for selection of individuals raised some concerns at the time that decisions were being made. Whilst the matter is no longer as live, there are residual effects and there is the potential for cases to re-emerge at some point in the future.

The University took a position on not using journal rankings or similar (and is a signatory to the Declaration on Research Assessment), but is aware that such practices are still

prevalent within many disciplines, and wishes to ensure that inclusion or exclusion from the REF does not get used in any of its processes.

6. What positive and negative effects did the key changes since the Research Assessment Exercise have?

The reduction in the number of Units of Assessment had no significant effect, although it did generate some discussion. However, the placement of a department whose research encompasses many disciplinary areas continued to be slightly problematic.

We support the efforts made to achieve consistency in the Panel Criteria, whilst still allowing suitable disciplinary variations.

The revised definitions of Category A and C were unproblematic, and did help to reduce consideration of inappropriate individuals.

The removal of esteem as a distinct element was helpful, although there was still a tendency by some to include such material in the Environment statement, especially as evidence of contribution to the discipline. Whilst highlights of this nature can be useful, we do not believe that lists of such information are helpful.

Notwithstanding our earlier comment (Q3) about the Environment statement, its revised structure and guidance was helpful. The reduction in environmental data was very helpful in reducing burden.

7. Are there any further comments you would like to add regarding REF 2014?

We have no further comments to add.

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