

## UKCDS response to HEFCE's second consultation on the assessment and funding of research

The UK Collaborative on Development Sciences brings together key government departments and UK research funders<sup>1</sup> who support development science research. We work together to maximise the impact of UK research funding on international development outcomes.

This response has been endorsed by the Board members of UKCDS<sup>2</sup>.

**Consultation question 1:** Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF? If not, explain why.

UKCDS broadly agrees with the proposed key features of the Research Excellence Framework, although our response provides some suggested improvements.

We commend HEFCE's efforts to take into account submissions to its last consultation and believe that the current proposals have been developed in genuine consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.

UKCDS strongly welcomes the inclusion of 'impact' in the REF and believes that HEFCE has struck the right balance in its proposals. We urge HEFCE to ensure impact remains a significant part of the REF following this consultation.

UKCDS strongly believes that the impact of UK research should be recognised at national and international levels and scale should be explicitly mentioned in explanatory text and in examples of indicators e.g 'changes to *national and international* legislation/regulations/government policy (including references in relevant documents)'.

**Consultation question 2:** What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing outputs? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

It is important that outputs other than journal publications can be submitted for assessment, as HEFCE has proposed, and we hope that HEFCE will encourage this and ensure that appropriate weighting is assigned to these outputs.

Two outputs we strongly recommend HEFCE recognise are:

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<sup>1</sup> Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC); Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS); Department of Energy and Climate Change; Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Department of Health (DH); Department for International Development (DFID); Department for Transport (DfT); Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC); Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); Medical Research Council (MRC); Natural Environmental Research Council (NERC); Scottish Government; The Wellcome Trust

<sup>2</sup> BIS was not involved in the preparation or approval process for this submission as it would not have been appropriate given their responsibility for this policy area

**Systematic Reviews** – allow policy makers and practitioners and lay audiences to rapidly understand research findings to inform a given policy or practice question and thereby providing a high quality scientific synthesis to strengthen the use of evidence in policy and practice decisions.

**International research capacity strengthening** – where real benefits to developing countries can be demonstrated, efforts to strengthen research capacity should be recognised. The UK Government has been encouraging this type of work for a long time and believes academic contributions should receive greater recognition, given that while it may not result in highly cited publications, it could impact significantly on the local community or on the science community in that country.

**Consultation question 3:** What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing impact? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

Assessing impact is not simple and HEFCE's proposals seem pragmatic. However, we have several significant comments on HEFCE's proposals.

We agree with HEFCE's wide definition of impact - however we suggest that 'environment' should be added to the list of impacts included on page 7 – given the others (economic, social, public policy, cultural and quality of life) are all anthropocentric.

We hope HEFCE will consider the REF as a chance to incentivise and reward serious efforts by research groups to get their research used and to have impact – rather than as a reward only where a wide range of factors have enabled a significant impact. Impact on policy, for example, often relies on many variables far beyond the control of academics – for example the political climate and resource constraints. Therefore we feel demonstrable efforts to enable impact should be rewarded. Some of the potential indicators listed by HEFCE in its 'common menu' are indicators of endeavour to have impact (e.g. research income from and staff exchanges with government organisations and industry and participation on public advisory committees), which suggests HEFCE is willing to recognise efforts rather than only hard evidence of contribution to impact (e.g. changes to clinical guidelines or patents granted and bought to market). We suggest that HEFCE is more explicit about this.

We urge HEFCE to retain flexibility in its definition and indicators of impact. The consultation document mentions that HEFCE will "develop clear criteria for establishing what would count as a significant research-driven contribution to an impact". Whilst we welcome HEFCE's intention to develop its thinking on assessing impact following the impact pilots, we would encourage HEFCE to avoid developing criteria that are too rigid given impact can be complex and diverse. Instead HEFCE could draw up guidelines, supplemented by a range of examples of good impact statements and case studies, for use by universities and assessors. HEFCE should also make it clear that it is not considering the impact of one piece of research, but of the research done by a unit of assessment and that HEFCE recognises that impact often comes from a portfolio of research rather than individual pieces of work.

Related to this, the common menu of impact indicators should be clearly explained as indicative rather than exhaustive as there may be valid indicators that have not been considered (e.g. improving yield in agricultural research) and others may evolve over the course of the assessment period.

In addition, we strongly urge HEFCE to emphasise that international impact is as valid as national impact and explicitly mentioned it in some indicators. For example, from the list of indicators- research income from government organisations; changes to legislation, measures of improved health services; and participation on policy/advisory committees – should be international as well as national. Research that has impact locally in countries outside of the UK should also be valued as much as national and international impacts (e.g. some research may have a major impacts on a small communities and a developing country and this should be recognised along with research that contributes to the UK economy).

Also, it seems strange that the indicators suggested for delivering highly skilled people only relate to industry – this potentially suggests delivering highly skilled people to the public sector is not as valuable.

The suggestion to address the problem of time lags by considering impacts that have become evident during the REF assessment period, but may have been based on research taken 10-15 years ago seems sensible. However, in the pilot HEFCE should further explore the issue of how incremental impact and ongoing development can be recognised.

Two further indicators we strongly urge HEFCE to include in its (indicative) list are:

1. *High quality evidence synthesis* under the 'Better informed public policy-making or improved public services'
2. *Increased international research capacity*. This indicator could be located under a new 'Type of Impact' category e.g. International influence

We are pleased that HEFCE are committed to increasing the role of users in research assessment. We recognise that the time and resources that are required by assessors is considerable and that it can be hard for individuals and organisations outside of academia to justify committing resources to it. We welcome HEFCE's intention to enable users to be involved in only the impact assessment, but recommend that some user representatives be also involved as full panel members where possible. The UKCDS secretariat is happy to act as a point of contact to provide suggestions for specialist input on development sciences, in addition to nominating panel members at the start. We ask HEFCE to consider whether there might be innovative opportunities for reducing 'users' time inputs in assessment panels or as special advisor, for example, through secure electronic systems to encourage their greater engagement.

**Consultation question 4:** Do you have any comments on the proposed approach to assessing research environment?

We are in broad agreement with the proposed approach to assessing research environment. In paragraph 79, under engagement, it is suggested that there should be recognition of arrangements being in place for researchers to engage with users through secondments. This should also include arrangements for staff to work in developing countries with the aim of helping to strengthen capacity. The NHS has been working to ensure medical staff who spend periods of their career working in developing countries are not disadvantaged in their career or pensions, the higher education sector should do the same.

**Consultation question 5:** Do you agree with our proposals for combining and weighting the output, impact and environment sub-profiles? If not please propose an alternative and explain why this is preferable.

We agree with the proposed weighting for the sub-profiles and that panels should have some discretion to alter these according to the discipline. However we recommend that there be limits to the flexibility to ensure impact remains an important component and at least 20% of the assessment.

**Consultation question 6:** What comments do you have on the panel configuration proposed at Annex E? Where suggesting alternative options for specific UOAs, please provide the reasons for this.

We support the recommendation of the Development Studies Association to be located in an appropriate Unit of Assessment, whereby the panel expertise is qualified to assess predominantly a social science subject. As development sciences are broader than Development Studies we recommend that all panels recognise the scientific quality and impact of research that concerns developing countries.

**Consultation question 8:** Do you have any suggested additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies? (If suggesting additional bodies, please provide their names and addresses and indicate how they are qualified to make nominations.)

We are pleased to see a number of development - related bodies on the list and do not have any further suggestions. UKCDS is happy to act as a point of contact for development sciences.

**Consultation question 9:** Do you agree that our proposed approach will ensure that interdisciplinary research is assessed on an equal footing with other types of research? Are there further measures we should consider to ensure that this is the case and that our approach is well understood?

It is essential to ensure interdisciplinary research is adequately rewarded, and a structure of disciplinary panels are always going to be challenged by this. However, HEFCE seem to be doing all they can to ensure interdisciplinary work is not disadvantaged and we welcome the statement that it is learning lessons about this from the last Research Assessment Exercise.

**Consultation question 14:** Do you have any other comments on the proposals?

We commend HEFCE for aiming to recognise research that pushes the boundaries of knowledge, as well as encouraging universities to consider and make more apparent their impact on society. We hope HEFCE's will be able to implement these proposals.

We also urge HEFCE to be clear about what metrics and data will be used in the REF and how these will be assessed to facilitate future analyses.

<b>Are you responding:</b>	On behalf of an organisation
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