EPC Research, Innovation and Knowledge Transfer Committee: Future Research Assessment Programme consultation

Section one: purposes of research assessment

Q1. 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.

a. Provide benchmarking information

b. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities

Q2. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?

The future UK research assessment exercise should focus on assessment of the QUALITY of research. There are, of course, related benefits and impacts associated with the exercise, but there are other metrics and tools to assess these in the sector. Broadening the purpose to explicitly assess these would risk the future UK research assessment exercise becoming too unwieldy and counterproductive.

Q3. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.

This is the appropriate exercise for the assessment of research quality.

Q4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

It is the responsibility of HEIs to determine appropriate performance incentives matched with appropriate resourcing models. It would not be appropriate to have these as core purposes of a future research assessment system.

It is absolutely essential to ensure that high quality, excellent research, wherever it may be and whatever size it takes, is recognised accordingly by the assessment exercise. The current REF has become skewed towards larger institutions undertaking large amounts of research and, indeed, the REF/RAE has driven strategic changes in HEIs, including institutional amalgamations and departmental closures. It has become difficult for smaller institutions and/or pockets of research excellence, which can have very significant civic and regional importance, to achieve appropriate recognition in the assessment system as it stands. For engineering research this has been compounded by the huge Engineering UoA in REF 2021. The assessment must be on quality not quantity.

Section two: setting priorities

Q5. 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.	6
b. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)	3
c. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate	4
d. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development	7
e. Impact of the system on research culture	2
f. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing	5
g. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021	9
h. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance	8
i. Robustness of assessment outcomes	1

Q6. 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:

b. Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion:

c. Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations)

d. Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research

e. Impact of the system on open research

f. Impact of the system on research integrity

Q7. 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.

Question 5 is difficult to rank in a meaningful way. For example, robustness and comparability of assessment outcomes are essential and must be implicit in any future assessment system if it is to have any value whatsoever – they must each be a 'given'. The future assessment system should not be set up to drive regional development per se but, equally, neither should the system destroy it. Socio-economic and regional impact are complex issues and can be many years before they become truly evident. A simple ranking does not seem helpful for Question 5, although one has been offered.

Q8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

With regards the impact of the system on research culture, the presented considerations in Question 6 are all aspects of the same complex puzzle, and their relative importance will depend on where you stand in the compendium of individual and institutional research. Ranking implies opposition or competition between the considerations in this respect, rather than co-dependent factors that need to operate in tandem. Ranking is not helpful, particularly if the considerations are indeed to be used for data-led, evidence-based decision making in this context. No ranking has then been undertaken for Question 6.

Q8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

Focussing assessment on outputs rather than inputs will be key in a future UK research assessment system that supports a positive research culture. This will require appropriate metrics to demonstrate a positive research culture. Given the complexities inherent in research culture across and between disciplines and institutions, and to ensure submissions are truly representative of research communities, consideration for metrics to be defined by the submitting unit may be appropriate.

Section three: identifying research excellence

Q9. Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?

	Should be heavily weighted	Should be moderately weighted	Should be weighted less heavily	Should not be assessed	Don't know
a. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers)			X		
b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards)					
c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets)	X				
d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward)		X			
e. Engagement beyond academia				X	
f. Societal and economic impact		X			
g. Other (please specify).					

Q10. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?

In the responses to Question 9, the weighting was considered to be relative to other elements, rather than relative to the weighting in REF 2021.

Robust research processes should be a given, a binary threshold to qualify, not an assessment measure. For this reason, no weighting has been indicated for this element.

High quality outputs remain the strongest indicator of research excellence and accordingly have been heavily weighted.

Q10. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?

There is a lack of clarity as to what engagement beyond academia means or how it differs from societal impact, so it has not been assessed separately. As noted earlier, societal impact can take a longer time to become apparent and there is concern this could, then, have an unintended adverse effect on assessment for smaller engineering units.

Q11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate?

	Yes	No	Don't know
a. Originality	X		
b. Significance	X		
c. Rigour	X		

Q12. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?

The criteria are by now well established, clear and appropriate. We recognise that researchers with different levels of experience may have a need for training and development in this area.

Q13. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate?

	Yes	No	Don't know
a. Reach	X		
b. Significance	X		

Q14. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact?

The criteria are established, clear and appropriate. We recognise that researchers with different levels of experience may have a need for training and development in this area.

Q15. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate?

	Yes	No	Don't know
a. Vitality	X		
b. Sustainability	X		

Q16. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?

The criteria are by now well established, clear and appropriate. Vitality and sustainability are evidenced through a range of metrics (PGR numbers and completions, income etc). A weakness in the current system is that individual academics in a small institution may be excellent but have minimal control over the wider environment beyond these metrics which are set at level beyond their research

Q16. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?

groups. Consideration should be given to adopting a template for environment so that similar criteria are considered for all institutions rather than giving a largely free rein in the narrative.

Section four: assessment processes

Q17. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:

c. both a. and b.

Q18. 18. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information?

No further comments

Q19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?

h. No

Q20. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

The burden of this would be out of all proportion and does not support capacity for growth and development. We are aware of no precedent or evidenced case to justify conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis.

Q21. 21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?

b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas

Q22. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise?

Assessment based on disciplinary areas has been shown to work well and provides useful comparative assessment across disciplines within and between institutions. Assessment at a level of institution would be too coarse, would not enable niche or specialist areas of excellence to be evidenced, would not recognise different assessment indicators between disciplines, and would fail to identify high or low performing units.

Q23. To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)

c. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:

i. Outputs

ii. Impact

iii. Environment

Q24. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

A wide range of metrics are available for consideration and this can lead to a certain amount of confusion regarding the use of metrics. It depends on which metrics are used in relation to outputs as these can be unhelpful (Journal Impact Factors, for example), whereas others (relating to numbers of outputs, for example) can be useful. Peer review of outputs must remain the gold standard in assessing output quality. Metrics should always be used with caution (i.e. to inform but not to replace peer review). Increased clarity in communications in a future research assessment exercise around the different types of metrics, and their appropriate use, is required. Importantly, the choice of metrics should ensure small institutions are not disadvantaged through, for example, less flexibility in selection of outputs, especially when clustered. We support standardised metrics where appropriate.

Q25. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?

There is probably no golden bullet. Spending a lot of time thinking about tweaks is unnecessarily burdensome in and of itself. We should minimise change and be very clear why any changes are being made.

The decoupling to 2.5 papers (average) has created a lot of work and a massive internal burden in selection through increased internal peer review. Consideration should be given to returning to a fixed numbers of papers with a staff circumstances case if necessary, or alternatively a fixed number of papers grouped around a research area to simplify the selection process'