

Exploring Options for Future Research Assessment

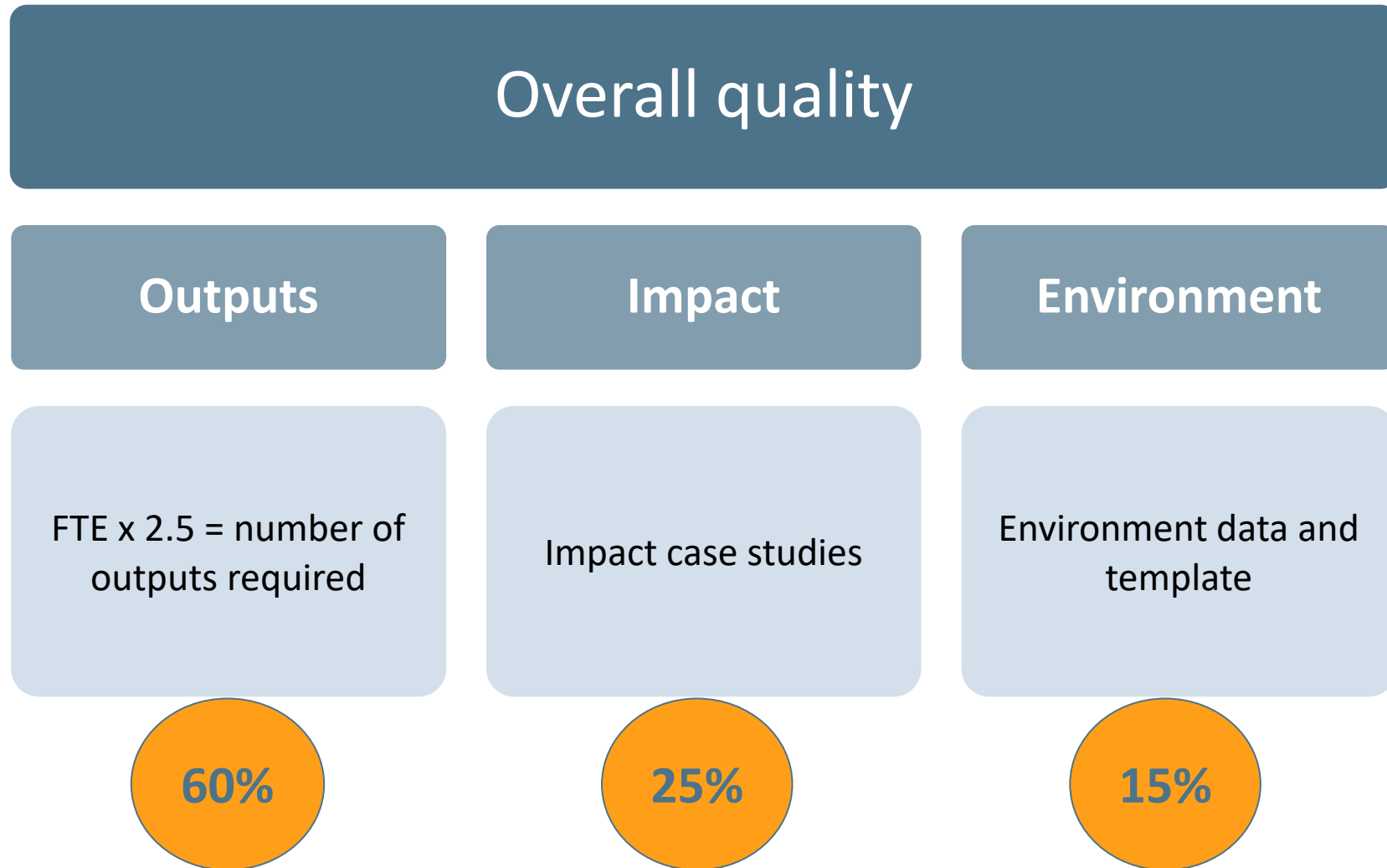


24 June 2021

What is the REF?

- UK's national system for assessing the excellence of research in universities
- The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies
- First carried out in 2014, replacing the previous Research Assessment Exercise
- Process of expert peer review carried out by expert panels for each of 34 subject-based units of assessment (UOAs), under the guidance of four main panels

What is assessed?



Why do we do it?

Funding

To inform the selective allocation of funding for research

Accountability

To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment

Reputation

To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information



REF and research funding

- REF results used to calculate allocation of ca. £2 billion annual block grant funding
- QR funding supports the university sector at the “**whole institution**” level (rather than project / academic level)
- Funding can be used flexibly by universities to support research excellence
- Provides stability to universities
- Complements project-based funding provided by research councils and national academies

Evolution of REF 2014

- All staff with significant responsibility for research had to be included
- HEIs could submit outputs of staff who had left
- Outputs submitted at the level of units not individuals
- Measures introduced to support equality, diversity and inclusion
- Open access requirements introduced
- Measures introduced to support the submission of interdisciplinary research



What's changed?

Increased focus on/awareness of:

- Collaboration across institutions, disciplines, and nations
- Team science
- Research careers
- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Open research
- Reproducibility/research integrity



Assessing diverse research contributions

- Focus on print publication (esp. journal articles)

97% of submissions to REF 2014

Extensive list of eligible outputs produced for REF 2021

- Focus on outputs over activities

85% of quality profile recognises and rewards outputs and their impact

Output criteria discourage submission of replication studies, open datasets etc.

- Perceived disadvantage for interdisciplinary research

Submissions assessed by disciplinary panels

Number of measures introduced in REF 2021

Future Research Assessment Programme

- Programme launched by the four UK Higher Education Funding Bodies in May 2021
- Overseen by the four funding bodies with advice from an international advisory group, chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman
- Aims to investigate possible approaches to the evaluation of research performance in the UK that can:
 - encourage and strengthen the emphasis on delivering excellent research and impact,
 - support a positive research culture,
 - while simplifying and reducing the administrative burden on the HE sector.



Future Research Assessment Programme

- Four complementary strands:
 - Learning the lessons from REF 2021. Evaluation package, including ongoing work, independent analyses and consultation with stakeholders.
 - Understanding international practice in national research assessment. What is done elsewhere, what works well? How the does UK system look from the outside?
 - Developing alternative models and enhanced approaches to research assessment. What are the alternatives including radical change and more evolutionary options?
 - Listening to views, concerns and perspectives on national research evaluation from a range of stakeholders. How are the different approaches received? What will the consequences be for the UK research system?

Scope

Why are we evaluating?
Do we need to evaluate at all?

- There will continue to be a system for assessing the excellence of HE research in the UK
- Any future system will need to:
 - enable the selective **allocation** of funding for research
 - provide **accountability** for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment
- And it will continued to be governed by the underpinning principles of equity, equality, and transparency

What should be assessed?

1. What characterises an excellent research system? What elements are required to allow UK research and researchers to thrive?

- Inputs (strong talent pipeline, diversity of researchers)
- Activities (rigorous research methods, collaboration)
- Outputs (full diversity of output types)
- Outcomes & impact (e.g. significant positive impact at local, national and international levels)

2. Which of these elements should be recognised and rewarded in a national research assessment exercise?

Discussion questions

1. What makes a healthy, thriving, inclusive research system?
2. What role does diversity of research play in creating and supporting a healthy research culture?
3. To what extent does the current REF reward and recognise diverse research contributions?
4. How could a national assessment system better recognise and reward diverse contributions?
5. What elements of the research system should a future exercise assess?

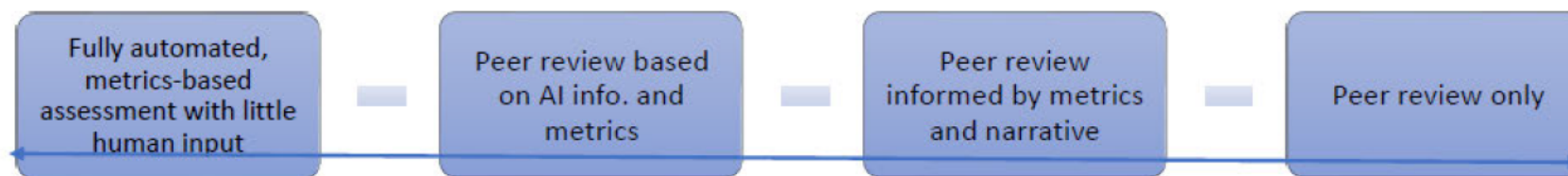
How should research be assessed?

- What are the features of a healthy research assessment system?

(e.g. equitable approach, transparent criteria and processes, proportionate burden)

- What is required in order to recognise and reward those elements we want to see in the research system?
- How do we 'evaluate with the evaluated'?





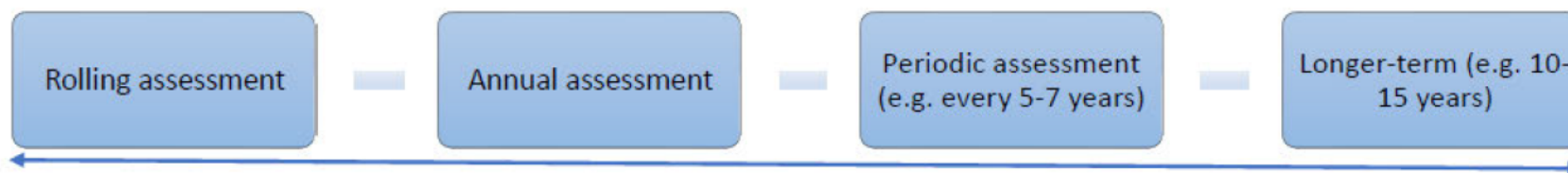
Automation



Centralisation (of requirements/criteria and submission elements)



Granularity



Frequency

Models to stimulate discussion

- ▶ Evolution of current system
- ▶ Metrics-based approach
- ▶ Performance agreements/self-evaluation
- ▶ Résumé for research organisations

NOT a shortlist!

Key questions

- Which approaches might best support diverse research contributions?
- Which approaches might unintentionally create barriers or perverse incentives?
- Who might this system discriminate against?
- Which approaches might reduce burden on institutions and researchers?

