
REF 2028/23/02

Research Excellence Framework 2028:

Summary of stakeholder engagements leading to initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework 2028 (REF2028/23/02)



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REF 2028

Research Excellence Framework

Research Excellence Framework 2028: Summary of stakeholder engagements leading to initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework 2028 (REF2028/23/02)

To

Heads of higher education institutions in the UK
Subject associations
Organisations with an interest in commissioning and using academic research including businesses, public sector bodies, charities and other third sector organisations

Of interest to those responsible for

Research, Planning

Reference

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Purpose and structure

1. This document summarises the outcomes of the extensive programme of engagement activities conducted with the higher education sector and wider stakeholders as part of the Future Research Assessment Programme¹ (FRAP). Together with a suite of evaluation activities², these form the evidence base which has been used as the basis for the key decisions of the Higher Education Funding Bodies on the high-level design of the 2028 Research Excellence Framework (REF).
2. The document summarises key findings from:
 - a. The Real-Time REF Review (Understanding perceptions of the REF)
 - b. Early sector engagement activities (round table discussions)
 - c. Institutional and individual feedback on REF 2021
 - d. Consultation on the design of the UK's future research assessment system
 - e. Meetings and other engagements with key stakeholders
3. Key emerging themes from these engagements relate to:
 - a. High-level principles, purposes and priorities for the REF
 - b. Maintaining the robustness of the REF
 - c. Impact on research culture and on research careers
 - d. Enhanced value from the assessment
 - e. Ensuring a proportionate administrative burden

Background

4. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It was first conducted in 2014 and again in 2021. The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education (HE) funding bodies (hereafter, 'the funding bodies'): Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE).
5. In December 2020, the funding bodies agreed to undertake a programme of activities to review the way in which national research assessment is carried out in the UK. A Programme Board, made up of senior representatives from the funding bodies, was established to oversee the programme of activities.

¹ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme>

² <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme/evaluation-activities>

6. The Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) was launched in May 2021. It sought to identify, through consultation and careful evaluation, those approaches to research assessment that:
 - a. encourage and strengthen the emphasis on delivering excellent research and impact,
 - b. support a positive, productive research culture, while
 - c. simplifying and reducing the administrative burden on the HE sector.
7. The evidence emerging from the evaluation and consultation activities led to the vision of creating an assessment exercise that will underpin:
 - a. a research system that produces **high-quality, rigorous** research that is **open** to all;
 - b. an **inclusive** and **collaborative** research system that supports a **diversity** of people, ideas, institutions, methodologies, outputs, and activities; and
 - c. an **engaged** and **impactful** research system that connects research with wider society to bring about positive socio-economic change
8. A number of planned engagements were conducted with the sector and with key stakeholders, which have informed decisions on the development of the next REF exercise. Such consultation and engagements have long been the cornerstone in developing research assessment in the UK and it was important to continue to work closely with the sector and other key stakeholders (including those who might not previously have been involved in such discussions such as early career researchers, technicians, software engineers and research-enabling staff) to co-develop the future system. Our stakeholder engagements have sought to gather evidence to inform what changes were necessary for the future exercise to remain fit for purpose and manageable by the sector.

The Real-Time REF Review³ (Understanding perceptions of the REF)

9. A large-scale review of the REF 2021 exercise was commissioned by Research England on behalf of the four higher education funding bodies. This project collected feedback on attitudes to the REF in real time as UK institutions prepared their submissions. It gathered views via a survey, as well as focus groups and one-to-one interviews with researchers, research managers, and institutional leads.

Early stakeholder engagement activities (round table discussions)

10. In June 2021 a series of early engagement events were held. These included a large-scale virtual event for 140 Pro-Vice Chancellors (or equivalent), a series of meetings with research users, and focused roundtable discussions on the following themes:
 - a. Supporting Early Career Researchers
 - b. Supporting diverse research roles
 - c. Supporting diverse researchers
 - d. Supporting a dynamic research system with socio-economic impact
 - e. Supporting rigorous and open research
 - f. Supporting diverse research contributions

3 <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8542/1/understanding-perceptions-of-the-research-excellence-framework-among-uk-researchers.pdf>

11. These focus group discussions brought together over 100 stakeholders, advocates and experts to explore different perspectives on the ways in which a UK-wide research assessment system can support (or hinder) a healthy, inclusive research system.

Institutional and individual feedback on REF 2021

12. From November 2021 an open survey was launched inviting feedback on the REF 2021 exercise from all participating institutions. The survey focused on gathering feedback on the important features of REF 2021 including both positive and negative aspects of participation. Feedback on the impact of changes made since the previous REF 2014 exercise was invited. And comments on the impact of COVID-19 and the mitigations to address the pandemic were also gathered. Over 100 responses were received to this survey from a wide variety of higher education institutions. See annex A for a summary of these responses.
13. A parallel survey was also run focusing on individual feedback which was intended to provide space for wider inclusion of feedback from other interested stakeholders. Over 700 responses were received to this survey. See annex B for a summary of these responses.

Consultation on the design of the UK's future research assessment system

14. From February 2022 a formal consultation was launched on the design of the UK's future research assessment system. A detailed survey seeking views on features of a future assessment framework:
 - a. purposes of a future exercise
 - b. guiding principles and priorities for system design
 - c. defining research excellence
 - d. assessment criteria
 - e. assessment processes, including frequency, granularity and use of metrics
 - f. burden
15. Overall 280 responses were received from a range of stakeholders predominantly higher education institutions participating in the REF, but including individuals and other key stakeholders such as sector bodies, subject associations, etc.. The responses to this consultation formed a substantial evidence base utilized by the funding bodies in developing the initial decisions on the next exercise. See annex C for a summary of these responses.

Other engagements with key stakeholders

16. Throughout the programme of work the FRAP team attended meetings with a wide range of stakeholders such as national academies, subject associations, REF 2021 panel members, mission groups and representative bodies, as well as engaging with representatives of specific researcher groups such as early career researchers, or equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) groups. Evidence from these engagements has also informed the funding bodies' decisions.
17. These various stakeholder engagements were interrelated and informed one another. For example, intelligence gathered from early engagements informed the design of the sector consultation, along with the programme of commissioned work and the specification of the commissioned projects. Throughout these engagements a number of key themes emerged, which were explored further as

the programme of work progressed. All of the evidence gathered throughout these activities formed the key inputs which shaped the funding bodies' thinking and informed the initial decisions on REF 2028.

18. The evidence and intelligence supporting the initial decisions is outlined in the remainder of this document. Summary data from the institutional and individual feedback on REF 2021 and the formal consultation are presented in the annexes to this summary.

High-level principles, priorities and purposes of the REF Purposes

19. In defining the high-level purposes of the exercise, some of the detailed operational aspects begin to be defined. As outlined in REF 2019/01, Guidance on submissions⁴, the primary purpose of REF 2021 was to produce assessment outcomes for each submission made by institutions. These outcomes delivered the wider threefold purpose of the exercise, as follows:
- a. The funding bodies intend to use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their grant for research to the institutions which they fund.
 - b. The assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment.
 - c. The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information.
20. In addition, the independent review of the REF, led by Lord Stern, identified three further roles fulfilled by the REF:
- a. to provide a rich evidence base to inform strategic decisions about national research priorities
 - b. to create a strong performance incentive for HEIs and individual researchers
 - c. to inform decisions on resource allocation by individual HEIs and other bodies
21. The funding bodies agreed that REF 2028 should continue to enable the allocation of funding and provide accountability for that funding.

Inform selective allocation of funding for research and provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment.

22. Throughout all engagements the use of REF results for the allocation of funding was seen as an important aspect of the exercise which should be retained.
23. In the survey of feedback on REF 2021, the link between the exercise and block-grant research funding was seen as an important benefit of REF and a key driver for participation in the exercise. Approximately half of respondents cited funding as an important feature and a third cited it as a benefit of the exercise. This was a view held firmly regardless of institution type, for example one large research-intensive institution indicated that: "The REF provides stability to core research funding; this is fundamental to enabling the institutional planning, investment, and collaboration needed to deliver UK research at a scale and excellence that is truly globally leading." while smaller and specialist institutions also felt funding was important with one institutions stating that: "The financial rewards of REF help HEIs, especially smaller ones, to build upon their strengths and to reflect upon their weaknesses, in order to plan for the future."

4 https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf

Provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information.

24. In the survey of feedback on REF 2021, benchmarking was seen as an important feature by the majority of respondents. It was key that results were seen as robust and reproducible to allow for fair comparisons. One example of this was a mid-sized institution which stated that “Using the same criteria to judge research excellence allows for the benchmarking of research within and across other HEIs. This is important because it guides proportional investment, builds research aspirations, and supports research partnerships for example with business and industry. These are important for a thriving research ecosystem that enables career development and progression of researchers.”
25. Questions 1 and 2 of the formal consultation asked respondents to consider what additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise. Feedback indicated that providing benchmarking was an important purpose of the exercise, with four fifths of institutions, and over half of individual responses citing this. A small number of responses highlighted the need to distinguish between benchmarking and ranking, with a clear steer that the latter is not desirable. Other respondents noted that a system enabling international benchmarking would be of greater benefit to the UK research system.

Provide a rich evidence base to inform strategic decisions about national research priorities; inform decisions on resource allocation by individual HEIs and other bodies; and create a strong performance incentive for HEIs and individual researchers

26. In questions 1 and 2 of the formal consultation around two thirds of respondents indicated that use of REF evidence to inform strategic and national priorities was an important purpose of the exercise. However, use of the REF as a means of resource allocations within institutions or for performance incentives was less supported by the consultation; while four fifths of institutions felt that the REF should be used for resource allocation, only half of individual respondents agreed. Just over half of institutional responses and only half of the individual responses felt that the REF should be used to create performance incentives.
27. Related to this, in responding to the survey of feedback on REF 2021, institutions found the results of the REF were helpful in strategic planning, with roughly one fifth of respondents feeling that driving institutional or department strategy was a key benefit of the exercise. Respondents felt that benchmarking for institutions and Units of Assessment provided useful information in positioning themselves in the wider research sector and developing future research strategy and in particular small institutions, looking to establish themselves as research active, felt that the esteem provided by REF results was an important driver for their strategies. However, it was also acknowledged that there could be some negative impacts if the results were used as performance indicators with approximately one fifth of respondents citing this as an issue. It was widely accepted that the exercise rightly seeks to focus on Units of Assessment rather than individuals, and that changes made to REF 2021 have improved this: around one third of respondents felt the submission of all staff and the decoupling of outputs from staff members were positive steps forward. However, there was feeling that the use of REF results in this way remained a concern and that more should be done to further preclude the use of the results from assessing the performance of individuals.

Additional purposes

- 28.** A number of responses stated that, whatever the explicit purposes of the next assessment exercise, it would drive values and behaviours within institutions and urged the funding bodies to be cognisant of potential unintended consequences. Respondents also urged the funding bodies to ensure that any additional purposes apply across a diverse sector with differing missions and ambitions and serving different communities. In addition, a number of other purposes were suggested.
- 29.** Just under a fifth of respondents, largely HEIs, stated that a future exercise should not seek to fulfil any additional purposes. These views rested primarily on the belief that increasing the number of purposes would reduce the exercise's ability to fulfil the core purposes of allocation and accountability. Respondents also noted that additional purposes would increase the burden of the exercise by increasing its complexity. A handful of these respondents noted that focusing on core purposes did not exclude increasing the emphasis on supporting a healthy research culture.

Driving a positive research culture

- 30.** Just under half of respondents to this question mentioned the promotion of a positive research culture as a stated purpose of the REF. The vast majority of these responses supported the inclusion of this purpose in future iterations of the exercise. However, a small number stated that the REF is not suited to this purpose. Questions were also raised about how best to assess research culture robustly and equitably across different disciplines and institution types. Driving EDI was the most frequently cited area, featuring in almost half of responses, along with research careers.

Developing an evidence base

- 31.** The second-most suggested additional purpose, proposed by almost a third of respondents, was to provide an evidence base (in a variety of contexts). Several respondents highlighted the value of REF evidencing the value of each disciplinary sector and its contribution to the economy, society, culture and wellbeing, and noted that this was particularly useful when engaging with non-academic audiences. Others noted the importance of REF for identifying disciplinary trends and net changes in the disciplinary communities. It was suggested that there is a strategic value to assessing the health of the research system in the UK – across all disciplines – to ensure its strength, diversity and resilience.

Informing strategic planning

- 32.** Similarly, a number of respondents discussed the role of a future assessment exercise in informing strategic planning at national and institutional levels. Views were split amongst respondents on whether a future research assessment exercise should be used to inform national and/or institutional research priorities. Those who argued in favour, pointed to the value of being able to identify strengths and gaps in disciplines at a national level, as well as the value to HEIs in understanding their own relative strengths and investing accordingly. Conversely, several respondents argued that REF data are unsuitable for this purpose, as they are retrospective. Concerns were raised that the REF would be used to assess the extent to which HEIs' research aligned with government priorities. It was also pointed out that priorities would vary across the four UK nations. Additionally, a handful of respondents stated that future exercises should aim to provide formative, actionable feedback to units and institutions.

Priorities

- 33.** In designing the next exercise, the funding bodies needed to consider and balance a number of competing priorities. Based on early engagements, a number of guiding principles were identified, and question 5 in the formal consultation asked respondents to consider and prioritise these principles:
- a. Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.
 - b. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)
 - c. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate
 - d. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development
 - e. Impact of the system on research culture
 - f. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing
 - g. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021
 - h. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance
 - i. Robustness of assessment outcomes
- 34.** Some of these principles potentially conflicted with others and therefore respondents were asked to indicate how the funding bodies should prioritise the consideration of these principles when designing a future system. Many respondents chose not to prioritise these considerations, highlighting in their responses that the principles were interrelated and could not be considered in isolation from one another. However, responses to the closed question and qualitative analysis of related open text responses both indicated that highest priorities were maintaining the robustness of the exercise outcomes, considering the impact of the system on research culture and research careers, and ensuring the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate.

Ensuring the results of the exercise remain robust, peer review and the use of metrics

- 35.** Feedback from the formal consultation indicated that the robustness of the exercise was the most important priority for consideration in development of the next REF exercise. Around three fifths of all respondents ranked this as a high priority consideration (ranked as 1, 2, or 3 out of 9). In addition, the robustness of the exercise was frequently discussed by respondents with general comments that the results of the exercise should remain robust. Maintaining comparability of assessment outcomes between units of assessment and institutions, and continuity between exercises were seen as important aspects of this. Without robust outcomes the REF could not fulfil its key purposes of informing selective allocation of funding, providing accountability for public investment in research, and providing benchmarking information and reputational yardsticks.
- 36.** One of the key elements of ensuring the robustness of the exercise highlighted throughout our stakeholder engagements was the preservation of peer review as the primary means of assessment. There was a widespread feeling that peer review was a trusted process, which ensured the integrity of the exercise and maintained the confidence and engagement of the sector in the robustness of the exercise. In the survey of feedback on REF 2021, one large multi-faculty institution indicated that "Peer-review, as a foundational element of the REF process, provides a trusted and respected framework for the allocation of, and accountability for, public funding for research. It ensures that public funding is appropriately targeted and allocated across the sector, especially in those areas where metrics-based judgements are not appropriately robust"

37. In early stakeholder engagements, there was also widespread concern about increasing the role of metrics in the exercise. Participants cited the negative impact this might have on underrepresented groups and early career researchers, the potential disadvantage for interdisciplinary research, the lack of applicability across disciplines, and the likely narrowing of output types submitted. Only a very small minority supported a move towards a more metrics-based system, citing the potential reduction in burden. However, there was some support for exploring metrics and indicators that may be used to support narratives around the research environment, including research careers, EDI, and wider research culture.
38. Consultation respondents were specifically asked if quantitative indicators should be used in future assessments. There was very little support for an entirely metrics-based assessment, less than one tenth of respondents felt this was appropriate. However, a quarter of respondents felt that metrics could be used to support peer review for the assessment of outputs, a quarter of respondents felt that metrics could be used to support the assessment of outputs, and one sixth felt that metrics could be used to support assessment of impact. It was clear from the responses that metrics should be used to support peer review and not replace it; peer review was seen as the 'gold standard' of assessment and was essential for the sector to believe that fair judgement had been exercised in the assessment.
39. One of the key feedback points on use of metrics was that metrics should account for disciplinary differences, and differences in region or national context, and in institutional size, strategy or mission. Around a quarter of those commenting mentioned this, stating that a 'one size fits all' approach would not be appropriate.
40. These views aligned with the conclusion of commissioned work on the Responsible use of technology in research assessment⁵, and expert advice from the Harnessing the Metric Tide⁶ report.

Developing an exercise which promotes a positive research culture, supports research careers and promotes equality, diversity and inclusion

Supporting positive research culture

41. Throughout our engagements we have received acknowledgement that the REF exercise has an influence on research culture and how research is conducted within institutions. Sometimes this can be a negative influence, but there was a strong desire to consider how future REF exercises could have a positive influence on research culture. For example, in the Real Time REF Review⁷, when asked what a future exercise should assess, some respondents thought that the wider research environment was an important focus of the exercise and that there should be a greater focus on the research process (environment) rather than the product (outputs and impacts). Suggested improvements included a focus on culture and determining how institutions or departments offer a nurturing environment, mentorship, support to early career researchers, and a mechanism to encourage innovation and creativity.

5 <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8980/1/can-ref-output-quality-scores-be-assigned-by-ai-experimental-evidence.pdf>

6 https://rori.figshare.com/articles/report/Harnessing_the_Metric_Tide/21701624

7 <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8542/1/understanding-perceptions-of-the-research-excellence-framework-among-uk-researchers.pdf>

- 42.** In the survey of feedback on REF 2021 a small number of respondents were concerned with the negative impacts of REF. This was a negative impact on individuals, such as using the results of the exercise or processes associated with participation in the exercise as a performance management tool; but also the REF's influence on driving research agendas within institutions was seen as negative. However, changes made in the REF 2021 exercise to submission of all staff with significant responsibility for research, and measures to decouple outputs from staff members by allowing flexibility in the number of outputs to be associated with each staff member were seen as positive steps. These changes served to shift the focus of the exercise further away from the assessment of individuals and would yield improvements in research culture. This view was reflected in individuals' feedback on REF 2021 and reinforced by responses to the consultation on the design of the future research assessment system.
- 43.** As noted in paragraph 33, respondents were asked to rank the most important considerations that the funding bodies should be guided by in designing the next exercise. The impact of the system on research culture was seen as the second most important consideration with over half of respondents ranking this highly (ranked as 1, 2, or 3 out of 9). In addition, when asked to comment on additional purposes of the exercise in question 2, one of the most frequently discussed additional purpose of the next REF exercise was the promotion of a positive research culture. This was cited by just under half of respondents to the consultation. However, a small number of responses stated that REF was not a suitable instrument for this purpose and in addition questions were raised on how to robustly assess research culture across different discipline and institution types.
- 44.** In the formal consultation respondents were asked to indicate which considerations were important when ensuring the next exercise had a positive influence on research culture. The impact of the assessment system on research careers; and on EDI were the most common considerations cited with over half of the institutions responding to this question discussing these issues. Comments on these aspects gave a strong steer towards REF exercises actively encouraging good employment practices and career development. There were suggestions that the exercise should recognise the entire research ecosystem and include contributions from a wider pool of staff such as postgraduate researchers, post-doctoral research associates, data analysts, technicians, library curators, etc. and that EDI aspects of the future exercise should be strengthened to support the representation of marginalized and underrepresented groups. As with feedback on the REF 2021, changes made to require the submission of all staff with significant responsibility for research and to allow flexibility in the number of outputs associated staff members were seen as positive, with around one eighth of institutions responding to this question calling for further movement in this direction, however a small number of responses indicted that further thought was necessary with the key issue being the burden associated with identification of staff with significant responsibility for research.
- 45.** In addition, many comments were received relating to the impact the exercise has on individuals and on research careers. Most comments were generally supportive of strengthening the EDI aspects of the exercise. Some comments specifically highlighted those research staff that might be marginalized by the exercise, e.g. early career researchers, those on fixed-term or teaching contracts, or those with protected characteristics. It was suggested that the REF should take greater account of research careers and should actively encourage and reward good employment practices in recruitment, employment conditions and status of researchers, especially in institutions' support for career development. There was support for an exercise which included recognition for the wider research team, including technicians, post-doctoral research associates, PhDs etc.. There were a small number of comments on the potential negative impact of the exercise on research careers, recognizing and avoiding the detrimental effects the exercise could have, and being mindful of unintended consequences of certain aspects of the criteria.

Developing an enhanced approach to the assessment of excellence

46. Another emerging theme across all engagements was the desire for a more inclusive and holistic approach to assessment. Research assessment should encompass the whole research cycle and be inclusive and recognise the contributions of staff members involved in the wider research process.
47. In early stakeholder engagements, participants considered what elements of the research process should be assessed in a future model and discussed the definition of research excellence. Some concern was expressed that a system which focuses on research activities and environment might 'distract from' or 'dilute' the assessment of research excellence. Others expressed support for a more rounded assessment of research excellence that extends beyond the current focus on outputs and impact. It was acknowledged that the environment element has aimed to cover this in previous REF exercises, but it was argued that the weighting of this element has meant that it is not perceived as central to research excellence. Those in support of a more holistic assessment argued that a broader definition would better support: open research practices, research integrity, research careers (especially early career researchers and those in research-related roles), and team science.
48. In feedback from the consultation on the design of the future research assessment system respondents indicated that the design of a future exercise should consider the impact on both individuals and on institutions. Institutional diversity was felt to be an important factor in research culture. There was an implication that certain types of institutional mission (such as a research-intensive approach) were favoured by the REF and this could lead to negative research cultures at those institutions. The REF should therefore be supportive of a more diverse sector with a range of institutional strategies or missions having space for broader models of research culture. Additionally, a number of respondents felt that recognition on the whole research system would have beneficial effects on research culture; this included recognizing the whole cycle of research, not just focusing on the final output; and also recognizing the contributions of the wider research ecosystem, not just focusing on research stars. However, a smaller number of respondents felt that the focus of the exercise should be on research excellence, with comments suggesting that broadening the assessment to include evaluating research culture would dilute the primary focus of the exercise.
49. Comments on a more holistic approach to the assessment incorporated thoughts on collaboration, open research, interdisciplinary research, and research integrity; there was some overlap between these considerations. There were also comments on the agility of the exercise or ability to respond to emerging themes and thoughts on gathering intelligence from the results.

Ensuring the administrative burden of the exercise remains proportionate

50. Across all engagements there was a strong desire to ensure that the administrative effort associated with the exercise remained proportionate.
51. In early stakeholder engagements there was broad agreement that the REF requires substantial investment from institutions, but also agreement that the burden is largely justified by the level of public investment linked to the exercise. Although roundtable participants stated that they would welcome attempts by the funding bodies to reduce burden, many warned against making this the primary focus of the review, citing the importance of ensuring that the exercise is robust. It was also noted that a proportion of the burden is created by institutions' implementation of the REF, rather than the exercise itself.

- 52.** In the survey of feedback on REF 2021 three fifths of respondents cited the burden on academics and on professional services as one of the negative aspects of the exercise. A significant fraction of respondents felt that the exercise diverted effort away from research. This is reflected in individuals' feedback, where over two-thirds stated that the REF had a negative impact on their workload. Comments by respondents revealed this view was widely held across institution types, but was of particular concern to small and specialist institutions. A small number of respondents felt there was a significant burden (primarily on staff working in professional services) created by changing the requirements of the exercise, particularly when guidance was released late in the process. Similarly, a number of respondents felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the issue as it encroached on academics' time during an already busy period.
- 53.** In the consultation on the design of future research assessment exercises respondents were asked how a future UK research assessment exercise might be designed to ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions remains proportionate. Over three quarters of respondents provided comments on the burden of the exercise.
- 54.** The majority of the responses on burden mentioned the importance of continuity, with minimal change between exercises being seen as important for reducing the burden. However, a substantial fraction of responses were supportive of necessary change, for example to introduce clarity, reduce burden or to positively influence research culture. It was felt that consultation with the sector on any changes to fully understand the consequences would be key, as was the importance of testing any new elements and clearly articulating their purposes.
- 55.** Related to this, over half of the responses cited early confirmation of guidance and provision of clear and concise guidance as positive ways to reduce burden. Issues cited here were difficulties dealing with multiple guidance documents, and the unnecessary duplication of information.
- 56.** The majority of respondents discussed the use of appropriate metrics or the reuse of data as ways to reduce burden. The majority of these comments were in favour of increased use of appropriate, robust metrics to inform assessment and reduce burden; however only a minority of respondents felt that metrics should be the only method of assessment. In terms of reuse of data, a small number of responses called for the interoperability of existing data sources in order to avoid measuring the same thing multiple times in different ways.
- 57.** Particularly burdensome parts of the assessment were the staff circumstances process, the selection of outputs for inclusion with around one fifth of respondents mentioning each of these issues, and the requirements for open access with around a tenth of respondents mentioning this.
- 58.** Small and specialist institutions commented that the REF burden is disproportionate for such institutions and that any new assessment exercise needs to address this issue. Smaller institutions generally do not have the dedicated REF staff and infrastructure for engagement with the exercise which is characteristic of some larger institutions.
- 59.** To further explore the burden of the REF exercise, the funding bodies commissioned a project to evaluate the costs and benefits of the exercise⁸. Conclusions of this study were broadly in agreement with our other engagements, i.e. the administrative burden of the exercise remains a significant issue, but that the exercise represents value for money when considering the funding allocated based on the results of the exercise.

8 See the report at: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme/evaluation-activities>

Annex A – Summary data on institutional feedback on REF 2021

From November 2021 an open survey was launched inviting feedback on the REF 2021 exercise from all participating institutions. The survey focused on gathering feedback on the important features of REF 2021 including both positive and negative aspects of participation. Feedback on the impact of changes made since the previous REF 2014 exercise was invited. And comments on the impact of COVID-19 and the mitigations to address the pandemic were also gathered. 105 responses were received to this survey from a wide variety of higher education institutions. Not all respondents provided detailed responses to all questions.

Important features

Respondents were asked what are the most important features of REF 2021 for higher education institutions? The table below outlines the most frequently cited features of the exercise.

| Feature | Number of respondents mentioning this feature |
|--|---|
| Providing benchmarking information or reputational yardsticks | 65 |
| Informing the allocation of funding | 52 |
| Providing evidence of research excellence or accountability for research funding | 50 |
| Providing information for strategic planning | 41 |
| Driving excellent research | 32 |
| Assessment delivered by peer review | 27 |
| Driving research policy (e.g. Open Access) | 26 |
| Supporting equity, equality and inclusivity | 26 |
| Minimising administrative burden | 14 |
| Transparency of the exercise | 14 |

Benefits

Respondents were asked to describe any benefits to their institution of participating in the REF. The table below outlines the most frequent benefits cited in the survey.

| Benefit | Number of respondents mentioning this benefit |
|---|---|
| Allowing a focus on institutional strategy | 49 |
| Focus on impact | 41 |
| Institutional esteem as a result of participation | 38 |
| Funding received as a result of participation | 35 |
| A collegiate approach to research and research management | 32 |
| Focus on open access | 31 |
| Recognition of researchers | 26 |
| Focus on equality, diversity and inclusion | 25 |
| Staff development | 24 |
| Investment in professional services | 4 |

Negative implications

Respondents were asked to describe any negative implications to their institution of participating in the REF. The table below outlines the most frequently cited negative implications.

| Negative implication | Number of respondents mentioning this negative implication |
|--|--|
| Burden on professional services | 59 |
| Burden on academics | 56 |
| Drives negative behaviours, e.g. through use of performance indicators | 20 |
| The REF timeframe affects research | 19 |
| Negative impact on research culture | 15 |
| Biases towards and against some subjects | 9 |
| Drives league tables | 7 |
| Drives staff movement | 4 |

Process positives

Respondents were asked in relation to preparing REF submissions, what positive reflections do you have on the process? The table below outlines the most frequently cited positive reflections on the process.

| Positive aspects of the process | Number of respondents mentioning this aspect |
|---|--|
| Promotes research impact | 39 |
| Drives improvements in internal structures and processes | 37 |
| Staff inclusivity | 34 |
| Highlights strengths and weaknesses in the research environment | 28 |
| Allows evaluation of research strategy | 26 |
| Communications with the REF team | 20 |
| Separation of outputs from individuals | 18 |
| Integration of the submission system | 11 |
| Identifies excellent research (through selection of research outputs) | 8 |
| Portability of outputs | 8 |
| Encourages publication of research | 5 |

Process challenges

Respondents were asked in relation to preparing REF submissions, which aspects of the process were challenging? The table below outlines the most frequently cited negative reflections on the process.

| Negative aspects of the process | Number of respondents mentioning this aspect |
|--|--|
| Lack of clear and/or timely guidance | 68 |
| General administrative burden | 56 |
| Identifying staff circumstances | 41 |
| Burden of writing impact case studies | 37 |
| Interaction with the submission system | 30 |

| Negative aspects of the process | Number of respondents mentioning this aspect |
|---|--|
| Monitoring open access compliance | 29 |
| Time taken for outputs selection | 28 |
| Audit | 22 |
| COVID | 18 |
| Identifying interdisciplinary research (the IDR flag) | 18 |
| Codes of practice | 15 |
| Engaging early career researchers | 9 |
| Lag between HESA and REF return | 8 |

COVID

Respondents were asked how COVID-19 affected their submissions to REF 2021? To what extent the mitigations put in place were helpful?

| What impact did COVID-19 have on your submission? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| No impact | 15 |
| Negative impact | 59 |
| Very negative impact | 4 |

| Where the mitigations effective? | Responses |
|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Effective | 62 |
| Not effective | 10 |
| Not relevant | 10 |

Changes since 2014

Respondents were asked what positive and negative effects did the key changes since REF 2014 have?

| Change to exercise | Positive responses | Neutral or mixed responses | Negative responses |
|--|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Submission of all staff with significant responsibility for research | 32 | 25 | 5 |
| Decoupling of outputs from individuals | 39 | 21 | 4 |
| Submission of outputs from former staff | 26 | 7 | 1 |
| Open access aspects | 18 | 17 | 9 |
| Revised weightings | 16 | 4 | 4 |
| EDI aspects | 21 | 7 | 15 |
| Institution-level environment assessment | 16 | 18 | 24 |
| Measures to address interdisciplinary research | 6 | 8 | 4 |
| Changes to impact | 20 | 16 | 9 |

Annex B – Summary data on individual feedback on REF 2021

From November 2021 an open survey was launched inviting feedback on the REF 2021 exercise from interested individuals. The survey sought input on the impact of the exercise on individuals and feedback on the impact of changes made since the previous REF 2014. Comments were also sought on the impact of COVID-19 and the mitigations to address the pandemic. 721 responses were received to this survey. Not all respondents answered every question.

Question 1: Asked for respondents to provide their name, email address and institution.

Question 2: In your view, have the following developments made between REF 2014 and REF 2021 been positive or negative for the UK's research system?

| Have the following developments been positive or negative for the UK's research system? | Extremely negative | Negative | No impact | Positive | Extremely positive | Don't know |
|--|--------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|------------|
| Submission of all staff with significant responsibility for research | 14 | 51 | 47 | 418 | 133 | 58 |
| Calculation at unit level of number of outputs required | 20 | 69 | 45 | 361 | 166 | 59 |
| Staff circumstances calculated at unit level | 14 | 73 | 92 | 291 | 75 | 176 |
| Outputs may be submitted by institution currently employing staff member AND the originating institution | 20 | 71 | 62 | 375 | 111 | 81 |
| Increase in weighting of impact to 25% | 75 | 202 | 111 | 174 | 54 | 105 |
| Introduction of open access requirements for certain outputs | 38 | 165 | 106 | 254 | 73 | 79 |
| Provisions to further support submission and assessment of interdisciplinary outputs | 12 | 24 | 169 | 272 | 60 | 183 |

Question 3: Do you feel that the changes to REF 2021 have affected the expectations placed on you as a researcher?

| Do you feel the changes to REF 2021 have affected the expectations placed on you as a researcher? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| No | 173 |
| Yes, positively | 227 |
| Yes, negatively | 195 |
| Don't know | 102 |

Question 4: What impact did REF 2021 have on your workload?

| What impact did REF 2021 have on your workload? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Significant negative impact | 248 |
| Slight negative impact | 251 |
| No impact | 113 |
| Slight positive impact | 41 |
| Significant positive impact | 36 |
| Don't know | 27 |

Question 5: Do you feel that the changes to REF 2021 have reduced or increased the burden compared with 2014?

| Do you feel that the changes to REF 2021 have reduced or increased the burden compared with 2014? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Significantly decreased burden | 15 |
| Slightly decreased burden | 76 |
| No change | 183 |
| Slightly increased burden | 177 |
| Significantly increased burden | 164 |
| Don't know | 101 |

Question 6: In your view, did REF 2021 exert a positive or negative influence on the following elements of research culture?

| In your view, did REF 2021 exert a positive or negative influence on the following elements of research culture? | Extremely negative | Negative | No impact | Positive | Extremely positive | Don't know |
|--|--------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|------------|
| Open research | 21 | 56 | 134 | 364 | 51 | 91 |
| Research integrity | 32 | 75 | 352 | 135 | 13 | 109 |
| Interdisciplinary working | 26 | 83 | 311 | 175 | 23 | 97 |
| Societal impact (public relevance) | 20 | 35 | 242 | 301 | 44 | 74 |
| Authenticity of research | 42 | 79 | 328 | 94 | 16 | 157 |

| In your view, did REF 2021 exert a positive or negative influence on the following elements of research culture? | Extremely negative | Negative | No impact | Positive | Extremely positive | Don't know |
|--|--------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|------------|
| Novelty of research | 50 | 130 | 315 | 113 | 13 | 95 |
| Quality of research | 25 | 103 | 280 | 207 | 30 | 71 |
| Equality, diversity and inclusion | 44 | 71 | 244 | 190 | 26 | 140 |
| Research careers | 55 | 172 | 204 | 133 | 16 | 136 |

Question 7: To what extent did COVID-19 impact on your REF preparations (e.g. selecting outputs, writing impact case studies and drafting environment templates)?

| To what extent did COVID-19 impact on your REF preparations? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Extremely negative | 108 |
| Negative | 310 |
| No impact | 244 |
| Positive | 11 |
| Extremely positive | 1 |
| Don't know | 42 |

Question 8: To what extent did the funding bodies' response to COVID-19 impact on your REF preparations (e.g. shifting the deadline for the exercise, extending the eligibility dates for impact case studies etc.)?

| To what extent did the funding bodies' response to COVID-19 impact on your REF preparations? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Extremely negative | 21 |
| Negative | 90 |
| No impact | 260 |
| Positive | 226 |
| Extremely positive | 17 |
| Don't know | 101 |

Demographic Data

Demographic data collected has been aggregated where appropriate, for example 'Asian' includes responses for 'Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi', 'Asian or Asian British – Indian', 'Asian or Asian British – Pakistani' and 'Any other Asian or Asian British background'. Similarly 'Black' includes responses for 'Black or Black British – African', 'Black or Black British – Caribbean', and 'Any other Black background'. Additionally, any category with 5 or fewer respondents is represented as <5.

Question 9: Please select the description which most accurately describes your current role

| Please select the description which most accurately describes your current role | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Academic – early-career | 76 |
| Academic – mid-career | 232 |
| Academic – senior | 304 |
| Research assistant | 0 |
| Research related role – library services | <5 |
| Research related role – research manager or administrator | 50 |
| Research related role – software engineer | 0 |
| Research related role – technician | 0 |
| Senior management | 24 |
| Other | 19 |

Question 10: Please select your REF main panel group

| Please select your REF main panel group | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Main Panel A | 124 |
| Main Panel B | 186 |
| Main Panel C | 205 |
| Main Panel D | 152 |
| Not applicable | 40 |

Question 11: I would describe my ethnic origin as...

| I would describe my ethnic origin as... | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Arab | <5 |
| Asian | 15 |
| Black | 7 |
| Chinese | 9 |
| Gypsy or Traveller | 0 |
| Mixed | 8 |
| White – British | 409 |
| White – Irish | 22 |
| Any other White background (please specify below) | 180 |
| Prefer not to say | 46 |

Question 12: The Equality Act 2010 considers a person disabled if: you have a physical or mental impairment or disability that has lasted or is likely to last at least 12 months, and this condition or disability has a substantial long-term effect on your ability to carry out day to day activities. Do you consider yourself disabled?

| I would describe myself as disabled... | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Yes | 65 |
| No | 597 |
| Prefer not to say | 45 |

Question 13: How would you describe yourself?

| I would describe myself as... | Responses |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Female | 299 |
| Male | 369 |
| In another way | 5 |
| Prefer not to say | 33 |

Question 14: Is your gender identity the same as the gender recorded at your birth?

| Is your gender identity the same as the gender recorded at your birth? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Yes | 666 |
| No | <5 |
| Prefer not to say | 36 |

Question 15: How old are you?

| I am... | Responses |
|-------------------|-----------|
| 18–24 years old | 0 |
| 25–34 years old | 30 |
| 35–44 years old | 206 |
| 45–54 years old | 246 |
| 55–64 years old | 169 |
| 65+ years old | 34 |
| Prefer not to say | 22 |

Question 16: Which group do you most identify with?

| Which group do you most identify with? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Buddhist | 6 |
| Christian | 188 |
| Hindu | <5 |
| Jewish | 17 |
| Muslim | 5 |
| No religion | 399 |
| Sikh | <5 |
| Prefer not to say | 74 |
| Other | 13 |

Question 17: Please indicate if any of the following apply to you.

| Please indicate if any of the following apply to you. | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Bisexual | 18 |
| Gay / lesbian woman | 12 |
| Gay man | 20 |
| Heterosexual / straight | 531 |
| Prefer not to say | 104 |
| Other | 7 |

Question 18: Have you taken any of the following types of leave within the past year?

| Have you taken any of the following types of leave within the past year? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Adoption leave | <5 |
| Extended paternity leave | 5 |
| Maternity leave | 15 |
| Shared parental leave | <5 |
| None | 654 |
| Prefer not to say | 29 |

Question 19: Please indicate if any of the following caring responsibilities apply to you.

| Please indicate if any of the following caring responsibilities apply to you. | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Primary carer of a child under the age of 18 | 224 |
| Primary carer of a disabled adult over the age of 18 | 9 |
| Primary carer of a disabled child under the age of 18 | 8 |
| Primary carer of an adult over the age of 65 | 36 |
| Carer of multiple listed above | 30 |
| None | 317 |
| Secondary carer | 91 |
| Prefer not to say | 38 |

Annex C – Summary data on consultation on the design of the UK’s future research assessment system

The FRAP consultation survey was undertaken between February and May 2022. Overall, there were 280 respondents. Respondents were requested to identify if they were responding individually or on behalf of a Higher Education Institution (HEI), other group or organisation. Details of the respondent types are set out in the table below.

| | Respondent type | Responses |
|---|--|-----------|
| 1 | Higher Education Institution (HEI) | 118 |
| 2 | As an individual | 97 |
| 3 | Other (please specify) | 12 |
| 4 | Subject association or learned society | 12 |
| 5 | Charity | 3 |
| 6 | Business | 6 |
| 7 | Department or research group | 12 |
| 8 | Public sector organisation | 4 |
| 9 | Representative body | 16 |
| | All Other (categories 3–9) | 65 |

For presentation purposes, the key groupings that will be used are responses as a Higher Education Institution (HEI), Individual, and a combined All Other category, incorporating responses in categories 3 to 9 in the table above.

Demographic information on Individual respondents is summarized at the end of this annex.

The breakdown of responses by country is given in the table below.

| Country | Other | As an individual | Higher Education Institution | Total by UK nation |
|----------|-------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| England | 60 | 82 | 94 | 236 |
| Ireland | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 |
| Scotland | 3 | 9 | 14 | 26 |
| Wales | 1 | 5 | 7 | 13 |

The survey consisted of categorical questions requesting selection from a list of given options, and open questions allowing narrative responses. Detailed qualitative analysis was conducted for each of the open questions, the data below are intended to indicate only the most common points arising from the analysis.

While respondents were able to answer all questions in the survey, no questions were mandatory to answer. Of the 280 respondents some did not provide responses to some questions.

Section 1: Purpose of research assessment

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.

- a. Provide benchmarking information
- b. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities
- c. Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation
- d. Create a performance incentive for HEIs

The table below outlines the number of respondents identifying each purpose by respondent type.

| | Provide benchmarking information | Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities | Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation | Create a performance incentive for HEIs | Responses |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|---|---|-----------|
| Higher Education Institution | 94 | 81 | 82 | 67 | 118 |
| As an individual | 55 | 65 | 49 | 31 | 97 |
| All other | 33 | 32 | 32 | 22 | 61 |
| All responses | 183 | 181 | 165 | 121 | 280 |

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

| What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Total comments related to additional purposes | 182 |
| Should drive a positive research culture | 76 |
| Should provide an evidence base | 50 |
| Should focus on recognizing and rewarding excellence | 29 |
| No additional purposes needed | 25 |
| Should inform strategic planning | 18 |
| Should raise the UK's research profile internationally | 12 |
| Should help to build research capacity | 11 |
| Should focus on core purposes | 7 |
| Should provide performance incentives | 6 |
| Should provide formative feedback | 4 |

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

| Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation. | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Total comments regarding alternative routes | 135 |
| Purposes fulfilled using existing reporting mechanisms | 33 |
| Comments on the use of metrics | 19 |
| Evolution of the current model | 18 |
| Purposes fulfilled by multiple assessment processes | 9 |
| Explore alternative methods of funding | 9 |
| Adapt the KEF model | 9 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Total further comments | 174 |
| Focus the purposes of the exercise | 21 |
| Comments related to benchmarking | 17 |
| Comments related to research environment | 17 |
| Comments related to funding | 15 |
| Comments related to performance incentives | 15 |
| Comments related to burden | 14 |
| Comments related to national priorities | 11 |
| Comments related to internal allocation of resources | 4 |
| Avoid duplication of effort and better align with other frameworks | 4 |

Section 2: Setting priorities

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)

- Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.
- Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)
- Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate
- Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development
- Impact of the system on research culture
- Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing
- Maintaining continuity with REF 2021
- Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance
- Robustness of assessment outcomes

Respondents were asked to rank considerations by preference, highest (1) to lowest (9). For the purposes of analysis, the responses have been grouped as highest (1, 2, 3), Medium (4, 5, 6) and Lowest ranked (7, 8, 9) and this is illustrated across all respondents in the following table.

| | Highest priority (ranked 1, 2, 3) | Medium priority (ranked 4, 5, 6) | Lowest priority (ranked 7, 8, 9) |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact | 99 | 90 | 54 |
| Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises) | 85 | 101 | 57 |
| Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate | 117 | 98 | 33 |
| Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development | 35 | 72 | 137 |
| Impact of the system on research culture | 129 | 83 | 37 |
| Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing | 51 | 93 | 105 |
| Maintaining continuity with REF 2021 | 38 | 56 | 153 |
| Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance | 55 | 79 | 113 |
| Robustness of assessment outcomes | 150 | 62 | 37 |

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)

- Impact of the assessment system on research careers:
- Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion:
- Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations)
- Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research
- Impact of the system on open research
- Impact of the system on research integrity

Respondents were again asked to provide a rank ordering of their priorities for the above considerations on a scale 1(highest importance) to 6 (lowest importance) and again they have been categorized in to high (1 and 2), Medium (3 and 4) and low (5 and 6) priorities for the purpose of analysis. This is illustrated in the table below.

| | Highest priority (ranked 1, 2, 3) | Medium priority (ranked 4, 5, 6) | Lowest priority (ranked 7, 8, 9) |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Impact of the system on research careers | 131 | 76 | 33 |
| Impact of the system on equality, diversity and inclusion | 131 | 79 | 31 |
| Ability of the system to promote collaboration | 64 | 105 | 72 |
| Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research | 46 | 83 | 111 |
| Impact of the system on open research | 40 | 59 | 143 |
| Impact of the system on research integrity | 81 | 82 | 82 |

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.

| What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Total comments on further considerations | 161 |
| Management of the administrative burden | 26 |
| Be inclusive of institutional type or mission | 24 |
| Continuity or comparability between exercises (related to robustness) | 19 |
| Be inclusive of all researchers and EDI considerations | 17 |
| Focus on research quality or excellence | 17 |
| Interdisciplinary research | 16 |
| Impact on research careers | 15 |
| Early decisions and early confirmation of guidance | 13 |
| Impact on research culture or driving a positive research culture | 12 |
| Promote collaboration | 12 |
| Transparency of the operation of the exercise (related to robustness) | 12 |
| Appropriate use of metrics | 10 |
| Refine or change the approach to environment | 10 |
| A holistic approach to research assessment | 9 |
| Continued recognition of research impact | 9 |
| Impact of institution locally or regionally | 6 |
| Drive open research | 4 |
| Minimize gaming | 3 |
| Stability of funding | 3 |
| Intelligence gathering | 2 |
| Responsiveness of the exercise to change/emerging areas | 2 |
| Promoting the UK's research reputation internationally | 2 |

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

| How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Total comments on supporting positive research culture | 212 |
| Refine the approach to assessing research environment | 32 |
| Improve equality, diversity and inclusion aspects | 31 |
| Promote collaboration and open science | 28 |
| Fully decouple outputs from staff members | 25 |
| Support diverse types of research | 20 |
| Consider employment practices and approaches to career development | 19 |
| Support interdisciplinary research | 15 |
| Support a diversity of institutional types, strategies and missions | 14 |
| Support more inclusive approach to staff | 14 |
| Incorporate parallel processes and existing standards | 14 |
| Reduce burden and move to a light touch exercise | 14 |
| Maintain the link to funding | 14 |
| Maintain a focus on research excellence | 11 |
| Take steps to minimize gaming | 11 |
| Provide clear and early guidance | 11 |
| Promote open research | 11 |
| Appropriate use of data and metrics | 9 |
| Maintain transparency and openness | 7 |
| Refine the approach to assessing research impact | 7 |
| Include narrative elements | 6 |
| Consider the whole cycle of research (not just outputs) | 6 |
| Provide detailed and formative feedback | 6 |
| Promote research integrity | 6 |
| Breakdown disciplinary silos | 4 |

Section 3: Identifying research excellence

Components of excellence

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

- Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers)
- Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards)
- Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets)
- Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward)
- Engagement beyond academia
- Societal and economic impact
- Other (please specify)

Respondents were requested to identify which assessment elements should be more or less heavily weighted or not assessed at all, and were further invited to provide narrative details of any other element they consider should be given greater or less weighting for the assessment. The “g. Other” category is not included in the analysis below, however to note there were overall 55 “g. Other” submissions, for which narrative submissions were made, which were analysed qualitatively and the findings included within the qualitative analysis of related questions.

The table below highlights the relative prominence given to some elements of the process by respondents.

| | Should be heavily weighted | Should be moderately weighted | Should be weighted less heavily | Should not be assessed | Don't know |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Research inputs | 23 | 104 | 97 | 22 | 4 |
| Research process | 64 | 129 | 33 | 19 | 3 |
| Outputs | 172 | 46 | 28 | 3 | 1 |
| Academic impact | 45 | 128 | 63 | 12 | 1 |
| Engagement beyond academia | 58 | 113 | 54 | 18 | 6 |
| Societal impact | 118 | 106 | 11 | 9 | 3 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Total comments on components of excellence | 181 |
| Retain current weightings | 19 |
| Change the weightings | 19 |
| Maintain weighting of outputs | 21 |
| Reduce weighting of outputs | 14 |
| Increase weighting of impact | 27 |
| Reduce weighting of impact | 10 |
| Increase weighting of environment | 15 |
| Reduce weighting of environment | 5 |
| More balanced weightings | 13 |
| Issues with capturing research income | 42 |
| Changes to the environment template | 28 |
| Engagement beyond academia | 24 |
| Societal impact | 21 |
| Broaden scope of outputs | 18 |
| Broaden scope of impact | 17 |
| Academic impact | 17 |
| Issues with assessment of the research process | 13 |
| Improve evidence for environment | 11 |
| Positive comments regarding research integrity | 5 |
| Negative comments regarding research integrity | 10 |
| More guidance needed | 10 |

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Incorporate a more holistic view of excellence | 10 |
| Capture career development | 9 |
| Important to consider research inputs | 9 |
| Issues with assessment of internal investments | 9 |
| Other indicators of impact | 9 |
| Importance of equality, diversity and inclusion | 8 |
| Consider disciplinary differences | 8 |
| Capture collaboration and team science | 7 |
| Better recognition of interdisciplinary research | 7 |
| Issues with assessment of environment | 6 |
| Burden of impact submission | 6 |
| Open Science | 4 |
| More clarity of equality, diversity and inclusion | 4 |

Assessment Criteria

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

| | Yes | No | Don't know |
|--------------|-----|----|------------|
| Originality | 184 | 44 | 14 |
| Significance | 189 | 43 | 10 |
| Rigour | 204 | 27 | 11 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Total comments on criteria for outputs | 175 |
| Broader definitions of research, e.g. replication studies, reviews, etc. | 42 |
| Supporting diverse output types | 35 |
| Clarity of information | 34 |
| Consistency of approach | 21 |
| Discipline, subject or UOA differences | 17 |
| Assessment methodology | 16 |
| Subjectivity of assessment | 16 |
| Appropriate measures or indicators of quality | 15 |
| Supporting interdisciplinary research | 14 |
| Use of metrics | 11 |
| Definitions of ratings | 9 |
| Author contribution | 7 |
| Research integrity | 4 |
| Transparency of assessment | 3 |

Question 13: Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate?

| | Yes | No | Don't know |
|--------------|-----|----|------------|
| Reach | 161 | 59 | 20 |
| Significance | 172 | 48 | 19 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Total comments on criteria for impact | 168 |
| Criteria not clear or need revision | 53 |
| Improve guidance | 48 |
| Rigour specifically is unclear or requires revision | 43 |
| Transparency of panel processes or assessment | 38 |
| Issues with comparing local and global reach | 30 |
| Criteria are clear | 24 |
| Incorrect perceptions of what is needed | 18 |
| Comparing and valuing different types of impact | 16 |
| Appropriate evidence of impact | 16 |
| Impact of assessment of research careers | 12 |
| Link to quality research (of 2* quality) | 11 |
| Burden of submissions | 11 |
| Recognition that impact is not linear | 10 |
| Policy impacts | 9 |
| Equality issues | 9 |
| Broader definitions of impact required | 7 |
| Too focused on individuals | 5 |

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

| | Yes | No | Don't know |
|----------------|-----|----|------------|
| Vitality | 149 | 66 | 22 |
| Sustainability | 152 | 64 | 20 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Total comments on criteria for environment | 175 |
| The current criteria are not clear | 114 |
| The current criteria are clear | 29 |
| Clarify the definitions of vitality and sustainability | 38 |
| Issues with the use of narratives | 32 |
| Disadvantages to small institutions or units | 24 |

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Consider metrics to improve assessment | 18 |
| Consider metrics to reduce burden | 14 |
| Challenges or issues with the use of metrics | 6 |
| Provide a clear articulation of good practice | 11 |
| Increase the weighting of environment | 10 |
| Maintain the weighting of environment | 2 |
| Reduce the weighting of environment | 1 |
| General comments on reducing burden | 9 |
| Support for institution level statements | 8 |
| Issues with institution level statements | 9 |
| Support for unit level statements | 6 |
| Reduce or remove unit level statements | 5 |
| Provide clear distinction between and any overlaps between institution level and unit level statements | 7 |
| Review the inclusion of the impact template | 5 |

Assessment Processes

Frequency

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

- stability
- currency of information
- both a. and b
- neither a. nor b
- Don't know

| | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Stability | 97 |
| Currency of information | 16 |
| Both stability and currency of information | 115 |
| Neither stability nor currency of information | 9 |
| Don't know | 6 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Total comments on conducting assessment on stability and currency of information | 163 |
| Should be less than 5 years | 4 |
| Should be 5 years | 14 |

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Should be between 5 and 7 years | 13 |
| Should be 7 years | 15 |
| Should be greater than 7 years | 8 |
| Longer assessment period would reduce burden | 58 |
| Issues with development of impact on short timescales | 37 |
| Affects long-term planning | 32 |
| Shorter timescales reward improvement over time | 18 |
| Pace of change in sector is slow, does not require short timescales | 16 |
| Concerns about changes to guidance | 13 |
| Maintain consistency | 10 |
| Maintain a fixed cycle | 10 |
| Less robust if more frequent | 6 |
| Concern for stability of REF management roles | 6 |

Sequencing

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

- a. Yes, split by main panel
- b. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)
- c. No
- d. Don't know

| Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Yes, split by main panel | 30 |
| Yes, split by assessment element | 33 |
| No | 151 |
| Don't know | 27 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis? | Number of responses |
|--|---------------------|
| Total comments on conducting assessment on a rolling basis | 174 |
| Increased burden | 96 |
| Could discourage interdisciplinary research if split by main panel | 40 |
| Could disrupt the stability of the sector | 24 |
| Could disrupt stability of long-term funding | 14 |
| Could lead to short-term thinking | 10 |
| Disproportionate impact on small institutions | 21 |
| Comments on splitting by assessment element | 17 |
| Comments on split by main panel | 3 |
| Issues with development of impact on short timescales | 13 |
| Lack of institutional overview | 11 |

Granularity

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

- a. Individual
- b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas
- c. Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes
- d. Institution
- e. Combination of b. and d
- f. Combination of c. and d
- g. Other (please specify)

| At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Individual | 7 |
| UOA based on disciplinary areas | 86 |
| UOA based on self-defined areas | 10 |
| Institution | 12 |
| Combination of UOA disciplinary areas and Institution | 79 |
| Combination of UOA based on self-defined areas and institution | 25 |

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

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Total comments on conducting assessment on a rolling basis | 174 |
| Retain disciplinary assessment | 70 |
| Assess environment at institution level | 52 |
| Assess outputs and impact at institution level | 21 |
| Positive comments about institution level assessment | 16 |
| Negative comments about institution level assessment | 18 |
| Assessment using self-defined themes | 52 |
| Assessment using REF defined themes | 10 |
| Institution level assessment could facilitate assessment of interdisciplinary research | 45 |
| Positive comments about individual assessment | 3 |
| Negative comments about individual assessment | 35 |
| Variable granularity in assessment | 34 |
| Institution level assessment may fail to identify pockets of excellence | 23 |
| Complete decoupling (i.e. not individual assessment) | 19 |
| Impact on or issues with small and specialist institutions | 19 |
| Granularity could affect equality diversity and inclusion | 16 |
| Benchmarking or comparability could be limited with institution level assessment | 13 |

| Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Difficulties with expertise for assessment when assessing at institution level | 12 |
| Granularity would affect the purposes of the exercise | 10 |
| Should maintain stability of assessment | 8 |
| Institution level assessment could address gaming | 6 |
| Issues with appropriate metrics at institution level | 5 |

Metrics

Question 23: To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)

- a. Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment
- b. Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
 - iii. Environment
- c. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
 - iii. Environment
- d. Should not be used at all.
- e. Other (please specify)

| To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment | 7 |
| Replace standard peer review with metrics for outputs | 18 |
| Replace standard peer review with metrics for impact | 7 |
| Replace standard peer review with metrics for environment | 14 |
| Use standardized metrics to inform peer review of outputs | 109 |
| Use standardized metrics to inform peer review of impact | 71 |
| Use standardized metrics to inform peer review of environment | 115 |
| Metrics should not be used at all | 58 |

Individual respondents: demographic breakdown

A total of 97 Individual respondents submitted responses to this survey. Individual respondents were requested to anonymously provide further demographic information about themselves, including: Ethnicity, Gender, Gender identity, Age, Disability, Religion, Sexuality, if they had taken parental leave (relating to Adoption, Maternity, Paternity, or shared parental leave) within the previous 12 months, and, Caring responsibilities.

Respondents were also asked to identify their Career/current role and where applicable their relevant REF Main Panel.

Numbers answering to these questions range from 78 to 87 individuals.

Demographic data collected has been aggregated where appropriate, for example 'Asian' includes responses for 'Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi', 'Asian or Asian British – Indian', 'Asian or Asian British – Pakistani' and 'Any other Asian or Asian British background'. Similarly 'Black' includes responses for 'Black or Black British – African', 'Black or Black British – Caribbean', and 'Any other Black background'. Additionally, any category with 5 or fewer respondents is represented as <5.

Ethnicity: Respondents were asked to describe their ethnic origin. The table below details the numbers responding.

| I would describe my ethnic origin as... | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Arab | 0 |
| Asian | <5 |
| Black | 0 |
| Chinese | 0 |
| Gypsy or Traveller | 0 |
| Mixed | <5 |
| White – British | 59 |
| Any other White background | 9 |
| Any other Ethnic group | 0 |
| Prefer not to say | 11 |

Gender: Respondents were asked to describe their gender and gender identity. The tables below detail the numbers responding.

| How would you describe yourself? | Responses |
|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Female | 32 |
| Male | 39 |
| In another way | <5 |
| Prefer not to say | 8 |

| Is your gender identity the same as the gender recorded at your birth? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Yes | 72 |
| No | 0 |
| Prefer not to say | 7 |

Age group

| Age group | Responses |
|-----------------|-----------|
| 18–24 years old | 0 |
| 25–34 years old | <5 |
| 35–44 years old | 19 |
| 45–54 years old | 29 |
| 55–64 years old | 18 |
| 65+ years old | 5 |

Disability

| Disability | Responses |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Yes | 5 |
| No | 70 |
| Prefer not to say | 6 |

Respondents were further asked to indicate which, if any, of the following impairments they experience. It is notable that most of those identifying impairments did not identify that they considered themselves disabled.

| Do any of these conditions or illnesses affect you in any of the following areas? | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Vision (for example blindness or partial sight) | <5 |
| Hearing (for example deafness or partial hearing) | <5 |
| Mobility (for example walking short distances or climbing stairs) | <5 |
| Dexterity (for example lifting and carrying objects, using a keyboard) | 0 |
| Learning or understanding or concentrating | <5 |
| Memory | <5 |
| Mental health | <5 |
| Stamina or breathing or fatigue | 0 |
| Socially or behaviourally (for example associated with autism, attention deficit disorder or Asperger's syndrome) | <5 |
| Other (please specify) | <5 |
| None of the above | 55 |

Religion: Respondents were asked to indicate the grouping to which they most closely identify. The table below details the numbers responding.

| Which group do you most identify with? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Buddhist | 0 |
| Christian | 18 |
| Hindu | <5 |
| Jewish | 0 |
| Muslim | <5 |
| Sikh | 0 |
| No religion | 42 |
| Prefer not to say | 19 |

Sexuality: Respondents were asked to indicate their sexuality. The table below details the numbers responding.

| Please indicate if any of the following apply to you: | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Bisexual | <5 |
| Gay / lesbian woman | 0 |
| Gay man | <5 |
| Heterosexual / straight | 54 |
| Prefer not to say | 20 |
| Other | 0 |

Parental leave: Respondents were asked to indicate if they had taken any form of parental leave within the previous 12 months. The table below details the numbers responding.

| Have you taken any of the following types of leave within the past year? | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Adoption leave | <5 |
| Extended paternity leave | 0 |
| Maternity leave | <5 |
| Shared parental leave | <5 |
| None | 63 |
| Prefer not to say | 11 |

Caring responsibilities: Respondents were requested to describe any caring responsibilities. This is set out in the table below.

| Please indicate if any of the following caring responsibilities apply to you. | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Primary carer of a child under the age of 18 | 26 |
| Primary carer of a disabled adult over the age of 18 | 0 |
| Primary carer of a disabled child under the age of 18 | <5 |
| Primary carer of an adult over the age of 65 | <5 |
| Carer of multiple listed above | <5 |
| None | 39 |
| Secondary carer | <5 |
| Prefer not to say | 9 |

Career and main panel group: Respondents were requested to identify their current job role, they were also asked to identify (where applicable) the REF main panel grouping relevant to them. Details are given in the tables below.

| Please select the description which most accurately describes your current role: | Responses |
|---|-----------|
| Academic – early-career | 7 |
| Academic – mid-career | 12 |
| Academic – senior | 37 |
| Research assistant | 0 |
| Research-related role (Research manager, Library services, Software engineer, Technician) | 16 |
| Other | 11 |
| Senior management | <5 |

| Please select your REF main panel group: | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Main Panel A: Medicine, health and life sciences | 19 |
| Main Panel B: Physical sciences, engineering and mathematics | 23 |
| Main Panel C: Social sciences | 20 |
| Main Panel D: Arts and humanities | 10 |
| Not applicable | 13 |