# Exploring Options for Future Research Assessment

14 June 2021

What is the REF?

- UK's national system for assessing the excellence of research in universities

- First carried out in 2014, replacing the previous Research Assessment Exercise

- The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies

- 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?

Overall quality

Outputs	Impact	Environment
FTE x 2.5 = number of outputs required	Impact case studies	Environment data and template
60%	**25%**	**15%**
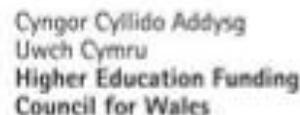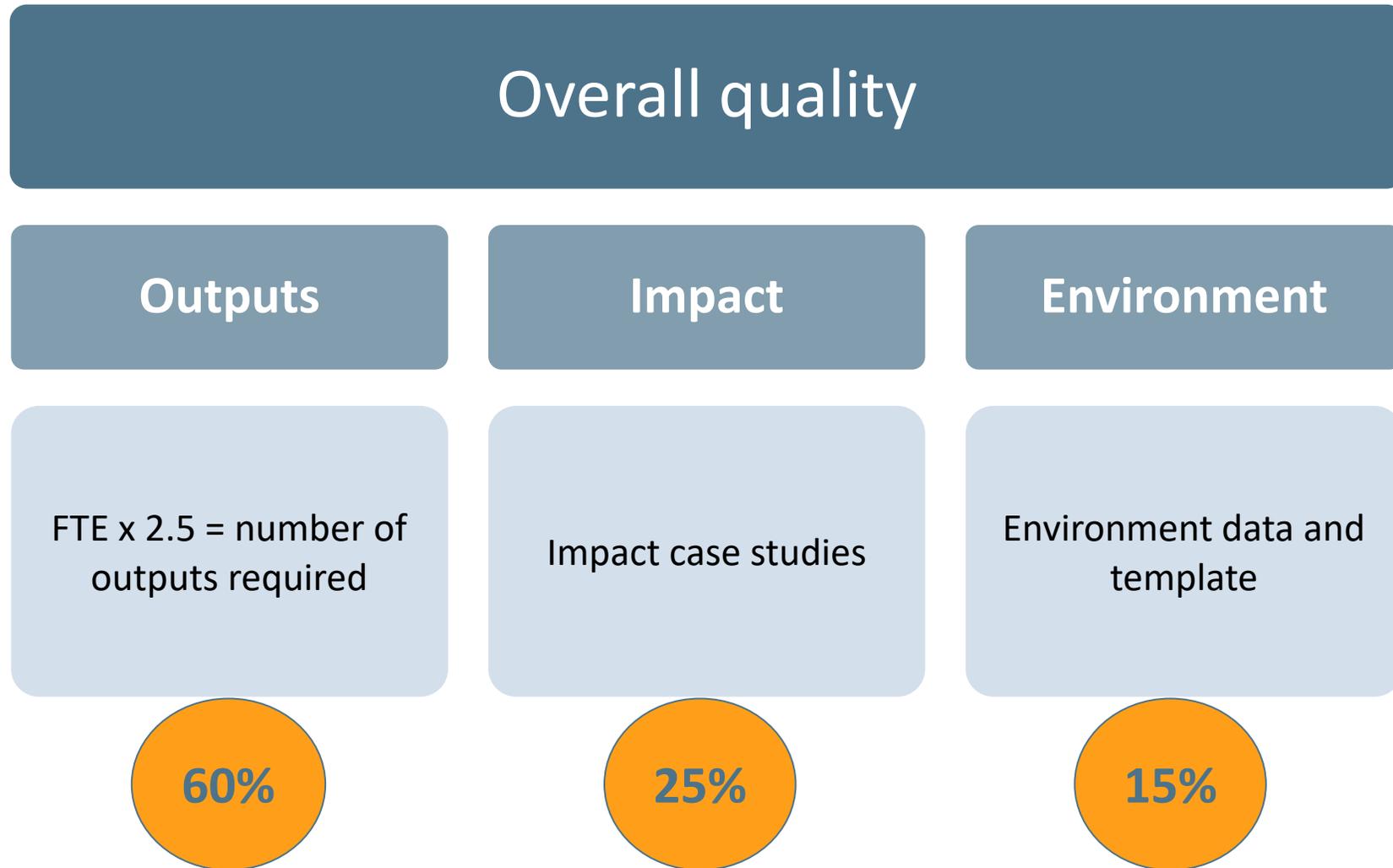
Why do we do it?

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

- Weighting of impact increased to 25%

What's changed?

Increased focus on/awareness of:

- Team science

- Transdiscplinary research

- Collaboration across institutions, disciplines, and nations

- Open research

- Reproducibility/research integrity

- Equality, diversity and inclusion

- Issues around research careers

Future Research Assessment Programme

- Programme launched by the four UK Higher Education Funding Bodies in May 2021

- 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.

- Overseen by the four funding bodies with advice from an international advisory group, chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman

Scope

- 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?

Breakout questions

1. What do you think is needed to allow ECRs to thrive?

2. What impact does the current REF have on research culture and on research careers, particularly for ECRs?

3. What elements of the research system should a future exercise assess e.g. should research activities be included or should it continue to focus on inputs and outputs?

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'?
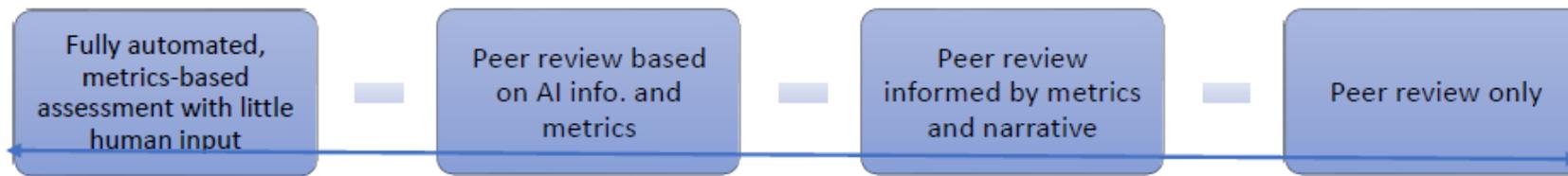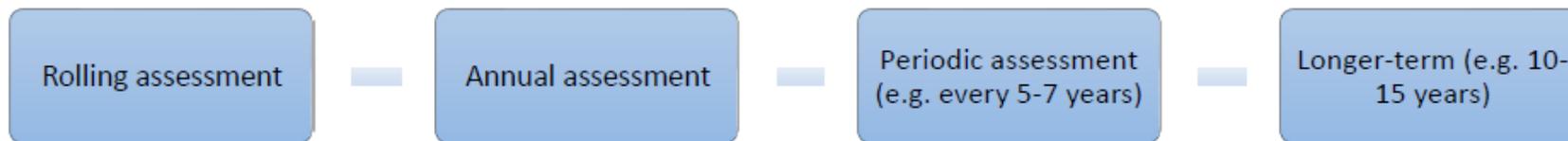
Models to stimulate discussion

▶ Evolution of current system

▶ Metrics-based approach

▶ Performance agreements/self-evaluation

▶ Résumé for research organisations

NOT a shortlist!

Evolution of current system

Build on changes made in response to Stern Review

▶ Remove requirement to submit one output

▶ Move to all-staff submission based on HESA contracts

Shift along one or more of spectra

▶ Assess all components at institutional level

▶ Assess outputs using AI to identify outputs for random sampling

Shift in understanding of excellence

▶ Revise top-level criteria (e.g. originality, significance and rigour)

▶ Redistribute weightings (e.g. to increase weighting of environment)

▶ Create multiple categories of output classifications (e.g. advancing knowledge, contributing to reproducibility, furthering collaboration)

Metrics-based approach

▶ Use basket of indicators to assess research activities, outputs and outcomes

▶ Option to peer review depending on output type and reliability of metrics

▶ Could be combined with periodic peer review

Pros: reduces burden on HEIs; could be reviewed annually to be responsive to changes in performance

Cons: cements 'publish or perish' culture; rewards a limited range of outputs; equality issues linked to citation data; metrics as unreliable proxy for quality

Performance agreements/self-evaluation

▶ HEIs are required to undertake regular self-evaluation

▶ Evaluate units against own strategy and aims

▶ Assess via narrative account supported by factual evidence

Pros: sector-led; enables HEIs to determine their own strategic priorities; encourages self-reflection; could play formative role

Cons: lack of direct comparability – impacts on ability to use outcomes to allocate funding

Résumé for research organisations

▶ Scaled up 'résumé for researchers' – narrative CV for institutions

▶ HEIs present narrative account of their institution's contribution to the wider research and innovation system under various headings e.g. knowledge and understanding; collaboration; impact on society; developing research careers; supporting a healthy research culture

▶ HEIs submit range of evidence to support claims (incl. established measures e.g. outputs, impact case studies)

Pros: recognises and rewards a wider range of research activities; gives HEIs flexibility to define their own priority areas/areas of strength

Cons: potential to increase burden; issues of comparability; flexibility could make it difficult to establish clear criteria

Key questions

- Which approaches might best support ECRs?

- Which approaches might unintentionally create barriers or perverse incentives?

- Who might this system discriminate against?

- Which approaches might reduce burden on researchers?