

The REF and accountability burden: discussion paper

24 March 2009

Introduction

1. This paper presents HEFCE's current thinking on the shape of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and invites members of the workshop to consider the implications for institutions, and in particular, the options for reducing the accountability burden of the REF.

REF background and timetable

2. In 2006, the Government decided to reform the research assessment and funding framework, proposed moving to a more metrics-based system after the 2008 RAE, and asked HEFCE to develop the new system.

3. During 2007 and 2008, we developed and consulted on proposals for a system driven by metrics (including bibliometrics) in the sciences, and expert review in the other subjects. Following consultation, in 2008, we announced that we would work to a more unified framework across all subjects, using a combination of indicators (including bibliometrics) and expert review as appropriate to each subject group.

4. Since the consultation exercise, we have been piloting the new bibliometric indicator with 22 HEIs, as a major new element in the framework. We have also started work to consider how to take account of the social and economic impact of research in the REF.

5. We are now working to produce a set of proposals for the more unified REF framework, for consultation in autumn 2009. We have established REF Expert Advisory Groups (EAGs), drawing on RAE panel chairs and members, research users and other key stakeholders, to advise us on the proposals. We are discussing the emerging proposals with a range of stakeholders, and this workshop is intended to focus on the strategic implications for institutions.

6. The current timetable is as follows:

Mar - Jun 2009	Conclude bibliometrics pilot and develop proposals for all main aspects of the REF
Autumn 2009	Consultation
Spring 2010	Announce decisions on the REF, including implementation plan and (initial) guidance to institutions
2013	Complete first full REF exercise
2014	Research funding for all disciplines fully driven by the REF

Introduction to current work

7. The first round of meetings of the EAGs for the REF took place in February 2009. The EAGs discussed experiences of the 2008 RAE, what lessons should be drawn from this for the REF, and the key features of the REF.
8. At the meeting, the EAGs generally supported our proposal that there should be three elements of assessment in the REF:
 - Output quality
 - Impact / engagement
 - Research environment
9. There was a widespread view that the esteem sub-profile, used in RAE 2008, was less useful and that a distinct element for esteem is not needed in the REF.
10. A summary of the discussion at the EAG meetings is at Appendix A. Many of the issues to which we refer throughout this document were also considered by the EAGs, so that summary should be considered in parallel with this document.
11. The second round of EAG meetings will be held in late April and early May 2009. Members will review the bibliometric pilot outcomes and discuss the interpretation and use bibliometric data in the REF, how expert review of outputs should be conducted and combined with bibliometrics, how impact/engagement can be assessed, and how to assess the research environment.
12. The outputs from this workshop will inform HEFCE's thinking and the discussion at the second round of EAG meetings.
13. The following appendices are included with this paper:

- Appendix A **REF EAGs: summary of discussion from round 1 meetings**
(The EAG terms of reference and membership are available on our website.)
- Appendix B **'Likely Impact of Methodological Decisions on the Research Excellence Framework'** (report by RAND Europe).
- Appendix C **Identification and dissemination of lessons learned by institutions participating in the REF bibliometrics pilot - Round one consultation executive summary** (report by Technopolis).

Please note that this is a draft and should not be circulated more widely at this stage.
- Appendix D **Executive summary of the RAE 2008 Accountability Review** (report

by PA Consulting).

Please note that this is a draft and should not be circulated more widely at this stage.

14. Our current thinking and the key areas for debate at this workshop are outlined below, highlighting questions for discussion.

Eligibility criteria and selection of staff

15. The approach used in RAE 2008 was for HEIs to select which staff to submit to the exercise, from Categories A-D. Up to four outputs per person were submitted, with outputs credited to the author rather than the institution at which they were based when the outputs were produced. All types of research output were eligible for assessment, as long as it met the Frascati principles.

16. There was felt to be some level of games playing around HEIs' selection and recruitment of staff for the 2008 RAE. Many members of the EAGs felt the REF should be more inclusive and avoid HEI selection if possible, in order to reflect the 'full picture' of departments' research. However, they also identified a number of problems with a 'universal' approach. There were mixed views on whether outputs should be credited to the author or whether the employing institutions should get the credit. Members also queried whether it is worth the effort of including Category C staff (except in some specific disciplines like Medicine).

17. In the REF, we expect that all types of research output that meets the Frascati principles will be eligible for assessment. Other issues around eligibility remain open for debate and we would like members of the workshop to consider the advantages and disadvantages of different options.

Question 1: Is there a real alternative to the selection of staff by HEIs?

Question 2: Should outputs be credited to the institution at the time of publication, or 'follow' the author should he or she move to a different institution?

Assessing outputs

18. In the RAE, up to four outputs per person were assessed through expert review, against the criteria of 'significance, originality and rigour'. Panels had discretion to elaborate the criteria and to vary weightings between the elements, with a minimum of 50% for outputs and 5% for each of environment and esteem.

19. There was widespread agreement amongst EAG members that outputs were key to assessing quality in the RAE 2008 and they should continue to be the dominant element of assessment in the REF.

20. In the REF, output quality will be assessed by combining expert review and bibliometric indicators of research quality, with the emphasis varying as appropriate to different subject groups.

Bibliometrics

21. The bibliometrics pilot is underway, testing different approaches to producing citation indicators.

22. The report 'Likely Impact of Methodological Decisions on the Research Excellence Framework', at Appendix B, draws on the experience of Australia's 'Research Quality Framework' and considers two broad approaches to using bibliometrics: 'bottom up' indicators based on groups of authors and 'top down' indicators for fields of research. These two approaches have a number of different implications, and both are being tested through the bibliometrics pilot.

23. The data collection phase of the pilot has been completed and we have received feedback from HEIs. The report from Technopolis at Appendix C outlines pilot institutions' experience of the data collection phase of the pilot, and comments on the two approaches. Outcomes from the pilot are just starting to emerge.

24. We now need to consider which of these approaches should be used for the REF, whether there are any alternative approaches to consider, and how bibliometrics should be combined with expert review. In the second round of the EAG meetings, members will review the bibliometrics pilot outcomes generated by these different approaches.

Expert review

25. In the REF, expert review will be the sole means of assessing outputs in a number of disciplines. It will also need to be combined with bibliometrics in some form in the remaining disciplines.

26. Some members of the EAGs suggested that the REF should require three outputs per person rather than four, especially if the assessment period is shorter. Some also felt that we should revisit the question of whether the number of outputs should vary by subject.

27. At this workshop, members are asked to consider what are the implications of the main approaches to assessing outputs through a combination of bibliometrics and expert review.

Question 3: What are the costs and benefits for HEIs of different approaches to using bibliometrics?

Question 4: What would be the implications for institutions to submit fewer than four outputs per person?

Impact

28. In the RAE, the social and economic impact of research informed panels' judgements about research quality in a number of ways. All types of research and research outputs, including applied research, were assessed on an equal basis. The criteria for assessment included 'significance' to both academia and wider society and the economy. Some panels invited short statements of the 'user significance' or impact of submitted outputs, to inform quality judgments. The environment and esteem indicators included consideration of collaborations with industry, income from research users, public policy work, and so on.

29. However, while HEIs have developed portfolios of research that deliver a wide range of social and economic benefits, the RAE did not encourage HEIs to present a full picture of the impact of their research to demonstrate their successes in this area.

30. In the REF, we aim to strengthen the approach taken in the RAE and more explicitly take account of the economic, social and cultural impact of research. Following our earlier consultation on the REF, we do not think that this can be done through a metrics-based approach. We will need to consider alternatives, through which institutions can provide suitable portfolios of evidence to be assessed by panels of experts and research users. We will need to address some key methodological challenges, given the diffuse and often long term processes through which benefits are realised.

31. The EAGs began to explore how to assess impact and identified two broad approaches:

(a) Assessing a portfolio of outputs and evidence of their impact. This could include a mix of longer term impact (that has occurred during the assessment period arising from research undertaken previously by the HEI), and shorter term impacts (for example, from applied research).

(b) Assessing activity to 'enable' impact, such as knowledge transfer activity, engagement with users and the public.

Question 5: What is a workable way, for HEIs, of taking account of the impact of research in the REF?

Expert panels

32. In RAE 2008, there was a two-tier panel structure: 67 sub-panels, one for each UoA, worked under the guidance of 15 main panels. The sub-panel structure has evolved gradually over successive RAEs and appear to be generally widely understood and accepted.

33. The 2007-8 REF consultation, in the context of a metrics-driven approach for STEM, proposed six broad subject groups for science-based subjects, and a larger number of UoAs for other subjects. We need to review this in the light of moving to a more unified framework with a substantive expert input across all subjects.

34. We invited EAG members to share their initial thoughts on the configuration of panels in the REF. Overall, they felt there was limited scope to move to fewer broader panels.

35. However, from an institutional perspective, reducing the number of panels and operating a broader-brush assessment process could potentially help reduce burden. On the other hand, this approach may result in less useful information being provided to HEIs at the end of the exercise.

Question 6: How much scope is there to reduce the number of expert panels, and what are the implications for institutions?

36. In the RAE, panels had discretion in a number of areas to vary aspects of the process, and each consulted on and published detailed criteria and working methods. This includes, for example, the weightings between the sub-profiles, the nature of the esteem and environment indicators, expectations about early career researchers, and so on. The EAGs indicated that in some areas greater consistency would be desirable for the REF.

37. We would be interested in the impact of these variations from the perspective of institutions preparing submissions, and whether there are particular areas where it would help to achieve greater consistency.

Question 7: Are there particular aspects of the system where you would want to see more consistency across panels?

Data collection

38. In RAE 2008, data was collected from HEIs specifically for the purpose of the exercise, rather than re-used from existing sources of data. This included staff, outputs, research income, PGRs and a range of indicators on environment and esteem as required by each panel.

39. For the REF, we wish to explore the options for reducing the burden of data collection for HEIs, for example in the following areas:

- Possible 'automation' for selecting papers where bibliometrics are used
- Using HESA data as far as possible
- Using a more structured template for the narrative elements (RA5)
- Introducing a more standardised 'common family' of indicators for environment and possibly impact.

40. We are considering what data for the REF could be drawn directly from HESA. In principle, income and PGR data is available through HESA, but in its current form, these data cannot be linked to individual researchers selected for any future exercise. Income data is linked to cost centres and PGR data is linked to UoAs, cost centres and JACS codes. It is not yet clear whether some of this will be useable for the REF. We could also investigate drawing information about staff from HESA, which may require HEIs to flag selected staff in their HESA returns and also provide their names.

41. Note that we also plan to phase out the Research Activity Survey (RAS).

Question 8: How much scope is there to reduce the burden of data collection (quantitative and qualitative)?

Aligning with HEIs' internal research management

42. PA Consulting reported on the accountability burden of the 2008 RAE (see Appendix D). It considers the costs of the RAE to HEIs and explores how much of this was part of HEI 'business as usual' and how far it represented externally imposed burden.

43. The report concluded that the 'internalisation' of RAE processes was relatively low in institutions, and recommends that we consider ways in which the REF can support and engage with the development of internal research management.

44. One of these may be through greater alignment between the REF data requirements and institutions' research information systems, but we would also be interested in exploring other ways to align with HEIs internal research management.

Question 9: How can REF be better aligned with HEIs' internal research management?