

# Societal impact and the Research Excellence Framework

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Drafted by:

Tim Flink

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Contact: [rmzsocim@hu-berlin.de](mailto:rmzsocim@hu-berlin.de)

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# 1 Introduction

Succeeding the periodic British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) from 1986–2008<sup>1</sup>, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) represents a modified evaluation mechanism for British university research. The RAE, and the REF as its successor, have constituted crucial parts of British research and higher education policymaking. These evaluations are quasi-mandatory for British universities if they want to receive considerable shares of their basic funding. Nowadays, REF is organised by the higher education bodies of the United Kingdom: Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE). The actual funding is distributed by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). UKRI uses the results of REF to allocate funds for one part of its “Mainstream Quality-Related Research” (QR).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, RAE and REF are held important, as their results have moulded into university league table scores, which has effects on attracting further research funds and students whose fees count much for university funding.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> RAE – in the 1980s still called *Research Selective Exercise* – took place in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. After budget cuts for universities up to 30 %, the principle that all universities would need basic funding, was abolished, followed by the dissolution of the University Grants Committee, which was responsible for calculating the need of basic funds; see Technopolis Group (2018): Review of the Research Excellence Framework.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/768162/research-excellence-framework-review-evidence-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/768162/research-excellence-framework-review-evidence-report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> UKRI has six types of “quality related” (QR) funds. Next to REF-based (1) mainstream QR funds, there are (2) the QR research degree programme (RDP) supervision fund, (3) the QR charity support fund, (4) the QR business research element, (5) the QR funding for National Research Libraries and Global Challenges. The budget of REF-based mainstream QR funds varies, but constitutes up to an overall of 10 per cent of university basic funding, which can be flexibly used. About 70 per cent of the mainstream QR funds are channelled to 27 research-intensive universities (24 from England) that belong to the so-called Russell Group; see <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RE-06082021-RE-How-we-fund-HEPs-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Chowdhury G., Koya K., Philipson P. (2016) Measuring the Impact of Research: Lessons from the UK’s Research Excellence Framework 2014. In *PLoS ONE* 11(6): e0156978. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0156978.

As was RAE, the REF is undergirded by three political goals: (i) to provide accountability and evidence for why it is worth investing public money into universities, (ii) providing benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, as well as (iii) justifying selective funds allocation. In this regard, REF does not greatly differ from its precursors.

The major change is due to the fact that REF introduced the rationale of assessing the societal impact of academic research activities. In that, its operators responded to criticism that the full spectrum of university research could not be chartered by numbers, that competition was cranked up to distorted levels (e.g. leading to poaching of high flyers' research output), that the administrative workload was too high both for partaking universities and the evaluators and, more generally, that science was not primarily supposed to be treated as an economic commodity, whereas its genuine overall for society should be better displayed. In regard of this critique, the summative assessment of research output was added with impact case studies (ICSs) that show how university research unfolds impact on society.

## 2. How the REF roughly works

In the REF, universities and colleges are invited to submit assessment reports about their annual performance in research for and beyond academia.<sup>4</sup> Overall, these retrospective university assessment was divided into three main criteria that had been evaluated over a percentage rate of (i) 65 % for its research output, (ii) 15 % for its research environment, and (iii) 20 % for its societal impact. However, for the latest and currently ongoing REF (2013–2020/21), starting off with a slight delay due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the share was rebalanced to (i) 60%, (ii) 15% and (iii) 25%. Thus, societal impact has gained more weight.

To thematically categorize the research performance, the institutional environment and the societal impact, science policymakers and management staff generated 34 “Units Of Assessment” (UOAs) and sub-panels whose experts assess their UOAs correspondingly. The 34 thematic UOAs and their

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<sup>4</sup> The equivalent initiative for university-based education is called the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF); see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-excellence-and-student-outcomes-framework-specification>

corresponding sub-panels fall into four main thematic areas or broad panels: A) Medicine, health and life sciences (6 sub-panels), B) Physical sciences, engineering and mathematics (6 sub-panels), C) Social sciences (12 sub-panels), and D) Arts and humanities (10 sub-panels).

The main actor responsible for those UOAs being assessed is the university management. For every assessment, hence once in six years, it is responsible to decide upon how the university's research can be best placed into the 34 UOAs whose submission reports will be gathered and sent to the sub-panels.

### 3. The Impact Case Studies (ICSs)

In the context of the REF, UKRI and (formerly responsible) HEFCE have defined societal impact as “an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.”<sup>5</sup> In that, the approach to societal impact by REF does not greatly differ from those of other countries.<sup>6</sup> Thereby, for REF it does not matter if the “reach and significance” of the societal impact is vested for local, regional, national or international contexts. As interviewed experts stated, the most important thing is that the displayed impact was sufficiently palpable.

Preparing an ICS is a process that gets co-organized by the university management and responsible researchers of that university. It is usually a grouplet of research staff (for the last REF, an average of 14 FTE, according to Chowdhury et al. 2016) that the university management envisions for two ICS per UOA to be drafted. Often, the pre-selection is based on small in-house analyses from the university management of what might work well as a narrative, before researchers – these should be advanced and independent in their career – are approached and asked for drafting the case. Preparing ICSs over the last seven years until 2020 means that researchers must be members of the university during the time period when their research was carried out.

The ICSs themselves are composed of five parts: a) a summary, b) a description of the underpinning research, c) bibliographic and/or project funding references, d) a detailed description of the unfolded impact, e) and further sources, such as

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<sup>5</sup> <https://re.ukri.org/research/ref-impact/>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.societalimpact.de>

policy or media reports, that corroborate the yielded impact.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, drafting a strong and convincing case study has become subject of strategic consultancy and guidebooks that encourage researchers to mount societal impact thinking to an entire project cycle.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. How the Impact Case Studies are valued

What actually makes for a convincing ICS, has become subject of public discourse and meta-research revolving around the REF and policies that were inspired by the REF (e.g. in the case of Excellence in Research for Australia). The results of these discussions point to contested opinions about the value of ICSs, and more specifically to a rather non-projectable task of demonstrating impact. It seems that the most convincing ICSs are presented clearly understandably, well-structured and are told by context-sensitive narratives, whilst also being backed with palpable, often numerical evidence. Already after the REF evaluations in 2014, hence after ICSs had been drafted and evaluated for the very first time, did administrators and researchers report that they would have obtained a clearer idea of what counted as a convincing narrative and impact case, and what not. Reviewers suggested “that the best impact case studies would reflect a hybrid of narrative lyricism, dynamism and informational efficiency. Case studies, it was felt, would need to be aesthetically pleasing yet sufficiently functional and fit for the purpose of ease-of-evaluation or rather panellists’ fluency in making decisions of impact claims.”<sup>9</sup> Our own interviewed experts unanimously agree that one cannot even say whether the presentation of numerical evidence rather than one only based on a narrative would yield better results, or whether ICSs relating to specific topics, e.g. health or environmental issues, and to specific target groups or regions – especially *within* the UK – would make for better ICSs.

Apart from this assessment, the more general critique is that the full spectrum of how to value ICS-presented content was hard to operationalise: while it was easy to discern excellent and poor cases telling how societal impact had been

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<sup>7</sup> ICSs from REF2014 are all publically available and can be found on the following website, sorted by institution and thematic areas:

<https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/Search1.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Tilley, H.; Ball, L.; Cassidy, C. (2018). *Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact toolkit*. London: Overseas Development Institute; <https://odi.org/en/publications/research-excellence-framework-ref-impact-toolkit>

<sup>9</sup> For many, see Watermeyer, R.; Hedgecoe, A. (2016). Selling ‘impact’: peer reviewer projections of what is needed and what counts in REF impact case studies. A retrospective analysis. In *Journal of Education Policy* 31(5), 651-665.

yielded, there are no yardsticks, degree or criteria to judge, why a case would count as mediocre or as only good. Hence, what makes for two or three stars rather than four or one, was hardly discernible.

## 5. Final Discussion

Since the 1980s, the UK has taken to implement a comparably strong evaluation regime<sup>10</sup> in science and higher education policy-making, and REF as well as its predecessors are one of its major instruments: scientific actors can hardly refute taking part, while their participation has direct and strong consequences on institutions, their reputation cycle, and their funded staff. Moreover, the toughness of the REF and RAE is due to the fact that the bulk of evaluation translates into quantitative auditing which hardly concedes room for manoeuvre or the dropping of a clanger, let alone case-specific differentiated qualitative valuation of work. As interviewed experts report, until 2014 RAE assessments meant that if you could not bank on four stars publications, just as others could, especially in STEM subjects, your institution would face hard consequences. Moreover, this evaluation regime has both underlain and stabilized an institutional Matthew effect: strong universities that were performing well initially could consolidate their pole positions easily, while others kept playing catch-up.

Whereas the REF faced negative<sup>11</sup> media coverage in the first years – and it still does –, the introduction of societal impact as a further criterion seems to find enough acceptance. First, because it was understood to even out the hitherto strong take on summative and quantitative assessments of ‘excellence’ in scientific research dedicated to science, in which the universities of the Russell Group dominate over all others. Second, because smaller subjects, interdisciplinary fields, practical- but also aesthetic-oriented subjects could better show their achievements. In this regard, respondents, in particular from Arts and humanities, were positive that the REF would allow them to demonstrate

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<sup>10</sup> Whitley, R. (2007). Changing governance of the public sciences. The Consequences of Establishing Research Evaluation Systems for Knowledge Production in Different Countries and Scientific Fields. In J. Gläser & R. Whitley (eds) *The Changing Governance of the Sciences: The Advent of Research Evaluation Systems*. Dordrecht: Springer, 3-27.

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, T.; Sage, D. (2014). Perceptions of the UK’s Research Excellence Framework 2014: a media analysis. In *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 36(6), 603–615.

their public relevance.<sup>12</sup> Sound research that might not (immediately) to publications – and some might never –, has now found an alternative way of being valued. However, criticism was formulated that the more fundamental knowledge in Arts and humanities but also in some STEM-research areas gets produced, the less could it be displayed as being impactful as more applied knowledge. Not least, open research was broached as an issue. While participatory and transdisciplinary work was widely acknowledged as a way of engaging with the public, the open access of research publications was more contested in this regard. Universities were reported to "gauge" whether authors of books and journals would attract enough public attention by their works.<sup>13</sup>

But altogether, societal impact has become an established criterion in the UK's assessment of university research, regardless of initial worries,<sup>14</sup> general critique regarding its costs<sup>15</sup>, sporadic critique to specific variables and, correspondingly, custom-fit ameliorations. Working out societal impact as part of the REF seems less of such an administrative burden, as it is lamented by individuals, than a chance for showing public relevance. However, challenges pertaining to the demonstration of societal impact need to be distinguished with regard to actors' groups and their actions. Those writing ICS report that they have greatly learned what works and what not, but reviewing experts seem to face challenges on how to judge cases of mid-range quality.

Finally, one can acknowledge that despite the general criticism the REF has spurred a more general debate on societal impact of universities and their research, both in the UK but also internationally.<sup>16</sup> Whether and to what extent these debates on societal impact have greater policy and institutional effects in other countries, would need to be answered by further research. Not least, as

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<sup>12</sup> Manville, C.; d'Angelo, C.; Culora, A.; Ryen Gloinson, E.; Stevenson, C.; Weinstein, N.; Wilsdon, J.; Haddock, G.; and Guthrie, S. (2021). *Understanding perceptions of the Research Excellence Framework among UK researchers*. Cambridge/UK: RAND Europe. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1278-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1278-1.html)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, B. (2011). The Research Excellence Framework and the 'impact agenda': are we creating a Frankenstein monster? In *Research Evaluation* 20(3) 247–253.

<sup>15</sup> Jump, P. (2021) Is the REF still useful? In *Times Higher Education*, 2 September 2021; <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/ref-still-useful>  
Bishop, D. (2021) Is the benefit of the REF really worth the cost? In *Times Higher Education* 28 April 2021; <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/benefit-ref-really-worth-cost>.

<sup>16</sup> Sivertsen, G. (2017). Unique, but still best practice? The Research Excellence Framework (REF) from an international perspective. In *Palgrave Communications* 3(17078), 1–6; <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201778>.

regards the qualitative assessment of societal impact narratives, REF is discussed to having left reviewers decision-makers with the burden of adjudicating on the basis of taste, which may jolt deeper debates if all forms of scientific reviewing for political contexts, can be regarded as rational and based on impartial scientific judgement at all.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Watermeyer, R.; Chubb, J., (2018). Evaluating ‘impact’ in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF): liminality, looseness and new modalities of scholarly distinction. In *Studies in Higher Education* 44(9), 1554–1566.