

# Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework

Call for evidence

January 2016

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# 1. Introduction

On 16 December 2015, Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson launched a UK-wide review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to ensure that future university research funding is allocated more efficiently, offers greater rewards for excellent research and reduces the administrative burden on institutions. The review is chaired, in a personal capacity, by the President of the British Academy, Lord Nicholas Stern.

The Government, Lord Stern and the Review Steering Group are agreed on the vital role of quality-related research funding (QR) as part of the UK's dual-funding system. Research assessment to recognise excellence and impact is important for a principled and evidence-based distribution of resources through QR and ultimately to contribute to national research strategies. But there may be opportunities to make the REF more effective and efficient in achieving this. It is essential that research assessment is fit for purpose, efficient, and carries the confidence of the UK academic community and other stakeholders. This review seeks to consider these aspects.

The review has already received many helpful inputs through the community's response to the Higher Education Green Paper consultation questions on the REF. We want to build on those responses. The review will also draw on the rich literature available evaluating the REF and predecessor RAE assessments (see [Evidence base](#)). Through this call for additional evidence we want to explore some of the issues that have arisen in early discussions and investigate ways in which a simpler, lighter-touch, system for the REF might be developed.

## 2. Questions

The primary purpose of the REF is to inform the allocation of quality-related research funding (QR).

1. What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?
2. If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?

While the primary purpose of REF is QR resource allocation, data collected through the REF and results of REF assessments can also inform disciplinary, institutional and UK-wide decision making.

3. What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?
4. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?

The incentive effects of the REF shape academic behaviour, such as through the introduction of the impact criteria.

5. How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?

Previous studies have focused on the costs of REF with respect to the time and resources needed for the submission and assessment processes. The Review is also interested in views and any associated evidence that the REF influences, positively or negatively, the research and career choices of individuals, or the development of academic disciplines. It is also interested in views on how it might encourage institutions to 'game-play' and thereby limit the aggregate value of the exercise.

6. In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and / or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g. success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming the system?

7. In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?

Much of REF focuses on the retrospective analysis of success achieved by institutions either through output or impact. Yet the resources provided anticipate continued success based on that track record. Are there means of better addressing forward-looking institutional plans and priorities, and how these might feed in to national policy?

8. How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?

The Review is keen to hear of creative ideas and insights and to be open in its approach.

9. Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?

### 3. Evidence base

Following the publication of the results of the first REF exercise in December 2014, the UK HE funding bodies commissioned a number of projects to evaluate REF 2014. The reports listed below are available at: [www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFreview/)

a. [Independent Evaluation of Impact in REF2014](#)

HE funding bodies commissioned RAND Europe to conduct an evaluation of the impact element of REF 2014.

b. [An initial analysis of the REF impact case studies](#)

Digital Science, a division of Macmillan Science & Education, working in conjunction with Nature Publishing Group and the policy institute at King's College London were commissioned to analyse the 7000 REF impact case studies and create a searchable database.

c. [Institutional feedback](#)

All institutions participating in the REF 2014 were invited to feedback on the process.

d. [Accountability review](#)

An independent review by Technopolis of the overall costs, benefits and burden for HEIs of participating in REF 2014, based on a sample from across the UK.

e. [Multi and interdisciplinary research](#)

Review in partnership with Research Councils UK, gathering a range of evidence on multi- and interdisciplinary research in the UK

f. [Equality and diversity in the REF](#)

Report from the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel on the measures to support equality and diversity in the REF 2014.

g. [Selection of staff for inclusion in the REF 2014](#)

Report on the staff selected for submission to REF2014

h. [REF 2014 Panel overview reports](#)

Each of the four main panels and its sub-panels produced an overview report detailing how they carried out the assessment, and providing observations about the assessment and the state of research within their discipline areas.

i. [The Metric Tide: A Review of Role of Metrics in Research Assessment & Management](#)

## 4. Terms of reference

The review will investigate different approaches to the evaluation of UK higher education research performance which can encourage and strengthen the emphasis on delivering excellent research and impact, while simplifying and reducing the administrative burden on the HE sector.

The review will draw on the evidence from the evaluation of REF2014 and will consider other models of research performance assessment, which could provide robust means of informing future research funding allocations.

The review will provide options for future iterations of the REF focusing on a simpler, lighter-touch method of research assessment, that more effectively uses data and metrics while retaining the benefits of peer review. The review should ensure that a future process identifies and supports excellent research across the UK, including dynamic changes in research quality and emerging areas of research excellence, retains the frequency of approach of the current REF arrangements (a 5-6 year cycle) and secures the confidence of the HE/Academic sector.

## 5. Steering group

The Government recognises the importance of ensuring that experts are responsible for overseeing the Review. Hence it will be overseen by a Steering Group, which will be chaired by Lord Stern, President of the British Academy. The other members of the Steering group are;

- Professor Julia Black, Professor of Law and Pro-director for Research, London School of Economics
- Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, immunologist and Vice-Chancellor, Cambridge University
- Professor Dame Vicki Bruce, psychologist, Newcastle University
- Professor Linda Colley, historian, Princeton University
- Gareth Davies, Director General of Business and Science, BIS
- Professor Julia King, The Baroness Brown of Cambridge, engineer and Vice-Chancellor, Aston University
- Professor Alex Halliday, geochemist, Oxford University and Vice-President and Physical Secretary, The Royal Society
- Professor Anton Muscatelli, economist and Vice-Chancellor, Glasgow University
- Professor Sir John Tooke, medical scientist, UCL and Past President, Academy of Medical Sciences

## 6. How to respond

When responding please state whether you are responding as an individual or representing the views of an organisation. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, please make it clear who the organisation represents by selecting the appropriate interest group on the consultation form and, where applicable, how the views of members were assembled.

We would prefer respondents to use the Citizenspace website to log their responses online at <https://bisgovuk.citizenspace.com/research-strategy/ref>.

We will also be able to take submissions by email at the address [REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk).

Written submissions should also respond directly to the questions set out in the Call for Evidence.

Responses to this call for evidence should be limited to not more than 3,000 words in total, and may focus on a sub-set of the question areas.

Responses must be received by **Thursday 24 March 2016**.

The consultation response form is available electronically on the consultation page: [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/research-excellence-framework-review-call-for-evidence](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/research-excellence-framework-review-call-for-evidence) (until the consultation closes). The form can be submitted by email or by post to:

Hannah Ledger  
Research Strategy Unit  
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills  
1 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0ET

Email: [REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk)



## 7. Confidentiality and data protection

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be subject to publication or release to other parties or to disclosure in accordance with the access to information regimes (these are primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004). If you want information, including personal data that you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, under the FOIA, there is a statutory Code of Practice with which public authorities must comply and which deals, amongst other things, with obligations of confidence.

In view of this it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the department.

## 8. Help with queries

Questions about the document can be addressed to:

Hannah Ledger  
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Email: [REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk)



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