Questions

Name: Anna Grey
Email: anna.grey@york.ac.uk
Address: Research Strategy and Policy Office, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD
Name of Organisation (if applicable): University of York

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Section 1

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The assumption that the primary purpose of REF is to allocate QR, rather than assessing the quality of research, frames the discussion around matters relating to funding rather than quality, which is unhelpful. Were REF simply about QR, a more simplistic method of assessment could be used, such as a set of suitable metrics (e.g. staff numbers, research income, outputs measures, HEBCIS data) but only in a limited number of disciplines (i.e. STEM subjects only). However, if the starting point for REF is as an assessment of the quality of research, which is then used for QR calculations, the focus is on more detailed and precise measures in the first instance. Whilst the move to metrics might be seen as more ‘efficient’, the evidence that it might be more effective is not yet clear. Given the concerns regarding gaming, there would be a danger that institutions would focus on gaming the metrics rather than focusing on improving research quality (which is the overall aim of institutional research oversight).

The use of HESA data, together with the use of the gross income figures rather than linking funds to individual staff, made the 2014 submissions significantly simpler and more cost effective. Aligning the staff census date for REF with the HESA census date would be helpful and would reduce the amount of auditing required post REF (which added considerably to the overall burden). It would also help if the criteria for REF were produced as early in the cycle as possible, so that institutions are aware of the information they need to collect.

Consistency regarding the descriptors of staff type, especially relating to research staff, between REF and HESA would reduce the time wasted on calculating whether a member of research staff is ‘research independent’. The use of ‘PI on a grant’ as the marker of independence is extremely unhelpful in relation to Arts and Humanities areas.

The introduction of impact case studies was time consuming, but this was due to the fact that this was a new element and hence there was no institutional expertise on best practice. As the process becomes more embedded, and institutions become more aware of how to track ongoing impact, the administrative load will fall. However, the questions relating to the impact environment could be easily included in the environment template, rather than as a separate form.

The definition of impact should not be refined or narrowed. The nature of impact is wide by definition, so it is crucial that a breadth be retained. There are no metrics that can currently be used to adequately measure impact; as highlighted in ‘The Metric Tide’ report, a narrative approach is seen as the most appropriate. However, greater consistency in
how impact evidence (eg underpinning research) is collected would be beneficial. Using impact metrics would increase the administrative burden because of the need for production, management and standardisation of possibly quite artificial metrics across disciplines where these are not currently collected, nor seen as adding value in themselves.

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

Where an institution has a consistent level and quality of research support across all disciplinary areas, returning information at an institutional level might be of benefit. However, it is highly unlikely that this will be the case, especially in relation to different disciplines (for example the research environment needs for medicine and history are very different). Where information might be produced at an institutional level, this would be very broad and reflect institutional policies, rather than implementation, thereby risking a loss of the level of granularity required.

Whilst there are some efficiency savings with using larger Units of Assessment, there are indications that some of the current UoA are too diverse to be helpful (for example Archaeology and Geography or Music, Drama and Performing Arts). Research excellence may have been overlooked and any administrative efficiency lost as the panels effectively worked separately. The benefits for institutions were also small.

Breaking the link between staff and outputs could be useful, but it is not clear how this might be undertaken. However, if this would allow institutions to permit staff to return fewer outputs, without personal circumstances having to be provided, this would be a major benefit. The administrative overhead for the production of this information was significant and the requirement to submit extremely personal circumstances was not appropriate.

It might be beneficial to consider measuring Impact across broader units than the current UOAs, if this allowed more interdisciplinary case studies to be included. The requirement to set the number of impact case studies based on staff numbers did impact on staff submission rates. This was not helpful. In addition, clarifying the rules regarding how case studies that move across research areas might be returned would be a benefit.
Section 2

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

There is very little overall data collected in REF that is not used institutionally to manage research. The only information not available to institutions, other than at REF submission, is RCUK ‘in-kind’ income. Providing these data on an annual basis would be beneficial. However, it should be noted that the data requirements for REF are only published part way through a REF review period and hence asking for data that have not previously been collected is unhelpful and adds to the cost of the exercise.

The one element that REF provides, that cannot be generated internally, is an external benchmark for research performance and the calibration of internal strengths. This is extremely useful for the setting of internal priorities and investment.

The introduction of Impact has highlighted to the institution the importance of monitoring and measuring the outcomes from research, once these have passed on from academia. This means that institutions are now putting in place processes and systems to track potential impact which will reduce the purely REF related costs.

It is noted that REF focusses on a subset of outputs, whilst the institution is interested in the full set of outputs and all research focussed staff. REF data are not separate to existing data, but are simply a reuse of other data. We would refer the review team to the work undertaken on Snowball Metrics and encourage ways in which these could be taken forward by the sector.

4. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The Government and research funders already have significant amounts of data available to them, via REF and the various HESA returns, but these are not always used consistently or shared effectively. However, to make sense of these data will require well-informed analysts, such as those working in HEFCE and the other funding councils.
If the Government wishes to focus on productivity, then a return that includes all eligible staff, not just those selected, would be helpful. If further metrics, such as citation data were used, these would need to cover the entire output of an institution, rather than just the outputs submitted.
Section 3

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

By definition, the REF submission is a competitive exercise, but it does not necessarily follow that it acts as a disincentive to collaborations between institutions and other bodies. This is demonstrated via a number of successful collaborations, such as the White Rose network between York, Sheffield and Leeds and the N8 partnership between the leading research-intensive institutions in the North of England. Where such collaborations are mutually beneficial, they thrive. Recognising research income where it has been won across institutions might be a one way in which such work is recognised, but it not clear how this would necessarily contribute to further demonstration of research excellence.

In terms of interdisciplinary research, there are difficulties with assessing the quality of a research output, as there is a need to recognise the contribution to a new field, rather than existing ones. This is not simply an issue for REF but a generic issue for interdisciplinary research as a whole.
Section 4

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

There is a difference between gaming a system, (making decisions to meet a metric rather than changing behaviour) and optimising a return. Moving a member of staff to a teaching only contract, so that they do not appear in an institution’s submission rate is gaming, not returning a member of staff is optimising the return. Any system that allows institutions and individuals to make selections will result in optimisation decisions, and creates additional workload. One way to avoid this behaviour would be to submit all staff and to require all institutions to submit robust HESA returns, in which all eligible staff are clearly defined. It would also be beneficial if the proportion of teaching only staff at an institution was published at the same time as the REF results, to avoid this area of potential game playing.

REF is not just about QR, it is also a very powerful marker of research quality and is a process which due to the peer review element and relatively transparent criteria is seen as relatively unbiased (as opposed to metrics on their own). As such, REF is seen as a better indicator of performance than could be undertaken by individual institutions. Metrics may be useful, but it needs to be recognised that for them to be statistically significant, the numbers of staff included needs to be above a critical mass. This size will vary depending on discipline.

There are benefits for individual staff; without REF the institution would be less supportive of all researchers and would concentrate on those who they perceive would be most likely to succeed. Staff also use REF to their benefit and part of the ‘REF transfer market’ is driven by individuals with strong REF submissions moving institutions, rather than institutions poaching staff. REF is also used by Departments to encourage investment in capital projects, especially to improve the environment statement. Whilst individual staff behaviour cannot be managed, REF submissions might consider long term sustainability and TRAC data.

It should be noted that REF is used to promote behaviour that is perceived as beneficial for the sector, such as open access, equality, PGR and staff training and
development. Without REF, institutions may not put as much support and emphasis into these areas.

One issue is the perception that research is being promoted at the expense of teaching, although the evidence to support this view is unclear. However, this perceived dichotomy may be increased if research and teaching are wholly split by being overseen by two different bodies, without a holistic oversight.

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The introduction of Impact in REF has focussed attention on this area of activity and this has had a positive benefit in terms of support being put in place. The decision that ‘impact does not move with the individual’ has been extremely helpful as it encourages institutions to continue to track activities and to support impact in the long term.

It is unclear that REF influences the development of academic disciplines. Finding ways that interdisciplinary research could be reviewed and assessed more effectively would be helpful. Undertaking work on developing more nuanced metrics could support this (for example providing information on the degree of interdisciplinarity).
Section 5

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 into 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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The Environment UoA template already includes information on research strategies and plans. Given that QR funding is given to the institution as a whole, it is unclear how individual UoAs might complete this information in any meaningful way. In addition, the plan would be based on an expected QR income, that may or may not be forthcoming, rendering the plans somewhat redundant. There is also a danger that institutions write research strategies in order to meet the criteria and priorities documented in REF rather than those they might wish to pursue.
Final thoughts

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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

We would suggest a further revision to the assessment of Impact in order to un-tie Research Impact narratives/case studies from a specific connection to a single output of “underpinning research”. Whilst the need for Impact to be shown to link to high-quality research is undisputed, we would like to see a broadening out of the way in which this is done, to allow the relationship between research and its impact to include research expertise rather than being limited to the effect of a single research project. Whilst we would support the retention of the link between impact and the institution where the research is carried out (rather than allowing impact to move with an individual academic), we would be interested in an exploration of how broader research expertise, in the relevant field at the institution, rather than a specific research project, could form the legitimate basis for an Impact Case Study.

We would also stress the importance to the whole sector of being able to re-use in the next REF exercise research impacts that were cited in Impact Case Studies in REF 2014, where these have continued to develop additional impact. It is important to recognise that the evolution of impact can occur over many years, and that an initial impact may give rise to further impacts later down the line. If institutions were prohibited from returning Impact Case Studies that had appeared in an earlier form in 2014, then a significant tranche of genuine research impact would be excluded from visibility, and the results of the next REF would be incorrectly skewed.

It would also be helpful if other collectors of research data such as RCUK could learn from the data collection expertise of the REF Team, so that data collection systems actively support interoperability and the research data needs of institutions themselves. Data should be entered once and systems designed so that information can shared, but noting that the institution must be the initial repository of these data. This would improve the overall quality of research output data, in particular and support developments such as ORCHID.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge receipt of individual responses unless you tick the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply ☒