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BRIEFING



Capturing Research Impacts

A review of international practice

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Prepared for the Higher Education Funding Council for England

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to inform the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) formulation of an approach to assess research impact as part of the proposed Research Excellence Framework (REF). HEFCE has identified several criteria that would be significant in developing an impact assessment framework. The framework should:

- be credible and acceptable to the academic as well as user communities
- encompass the full range of economic, social, public policy, welfare, cultural and quality-of-life benefits
- within a single broad approach, be adaptable to apply to all disciplines
- be practicable and not generate an excessive workload for the sector
- avoid undesirable perceptions and incentives
- complement other funding streams including the research councils' approach to increasing the impact of research.

Methods

To inform their thinking, HEFCE commissioned RAND Europe to undertake an international review of how other research agencies measure impact. The objectives of the review were:

- to review international practice in assessing research impact
- to identify relevant challenges, lessons and observations from international practice that will help HEFCE develop a framework for assessing research impact.¹

Following a quick scan of international examples of impact frameworks, we selected four frameworks for further analysis: the Australian Research Quality and Accessibility Framework (RQF), the UK RAND/ARC Impact Scoring System (RAISS). Impact Scoring System, the US Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) and the Dutch Evaluating Research in Context (ERiC).

A short summary of each framework is provided in Table 1. Details of the frameworks are provided in chapters 2–5.

¹ Please note the project was not meant to review the academic literature in the field.

Table 1 Frameworks reviewed

| Framework | Country | Summary Description |
|--|-------------|--|
| Research Quality and Accessibility Framework (RQF) | Australia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The RQF is a worked up example of measuring impact in a higher education context. ▪ It takes the form of a case study approach: research groupings submit examples of research with high impact (and provide relevant evidence). ▪ The RQF was tested and is applicable to capture impact, but has never been implemented due to a change of government. |
| RAND/ARC Impact Scoring System (RAISS) | UK | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The RAISS framework is a first step towards an indicator-based approach. ▪ It takes the form of a questionnaire (to be filled in by researchers) to capture over 150 potential research impacts. ▪ The framework has been used to capture the impact of research grants of the Arthritis Research Campaign (ARC). |
| Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) | US | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The PART framework is a self-evaluation approach used to assess programme performance across federal government. ▪ It takes the form of a questionnaire. It asks programmes to assess themselves against their own strategic (impact) goals. ▪ PART is used to assess impact and efficiency of over 1000 federal programmes. |
| Evaluating Research in Context (ERiC) | Netherlands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ERiC is a new framework to assess research impact (or 'societal quality') in the Dutch higher education system. ▪ It combines several evaluation approaches: ie self-evaluation; an indicator-based approach; and stakeholder analysis. ▪ ERiC is supposed to be integrated into the current higher education evaluation system this year. |

The four frameworks were selected in order to ensure that the main evaluation approaches that are used in practice were captured: case study approach (RQF), indicator approach (RAISS), self-evaluation approach (PART) and a mixture of the three (ERiC).

The case studies were then discussed in a workshop with the HEFCE project team. The aim of the workshop was to identify and capture the main challenges, lessons and ideas that arise from the frameworks.

Also during the workshop, the HEFCE team and RAND Europe team assessed the four frameworks using a traffic-lighting methodology against HEFCE's criteria of an adequate framework – which are that it should be credible and acceptable to the academic as well as user communities; encompass the full range of economic, social, public policy, welfare, cultural and quality-of-life benefits, etc.

Findings

The key observations from the traffic-lighting exercise were:

- the work of the Australian RQF Working Group on Impact Assessment provides a promising basis for developing an impact approach for the REF
- impact indicators (as in the RAISS framework) are not sufficiently developed and tested to be used to make funding decisions.

The main observations in terms of challenges, lessons and ideas that arose from the workshop are outlined below.

Strategic intent

- To be effective it will be essential that the approach can provide an unambiguous rating and comparison of submissions.
- HEFCE could consider allowing some flexibility in the weights given to the three areas of assessment – quality, impact and environment.

- Because the REF will drive the behaviour of HEIs, it will be important to be very explicit about the criteria for assessing impact.

Defining impact

- Because of the diverse nature of impacts, HEFCE should consult widely and then provide a definition or statement of what it defines as impact.
- Because of the imperfections of both quantitative and qualitative measures, HEFCE should use a combination of the two, such as using case studies or narratives supported by possible proxy indicators of impact as proposed for the RQF.

Unit of analysis

- HEFCE should consider providing flexibility in how submissions are organised. This could be through the RQF approach which allows researchers and institutions discretion in how they organise into groupings – while still requiring groups to have some minimum size.

Attribution

- There is a need to acknowledge that the issue of attribution is complex, but can be mitigated by a case study approach, and by focusing on those impacts where attribution is more readily demonstrated. It needs to be made explicit that case studies are illustrative, rather than intended to measure the total impact of an HEI.
- A verification mechanism is likely to be important in building confidence in the approach.

Burden

- HEFCE will need to undertake further work to understand the likely burden of assessing impact, and compare it against the burden of previous RAEs.

End users

- Because of the key role of end users, HEFCE needs to do further work to understand the motivations, likelihood and commitment of end users in participating in the assessment of research impact.