

Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation

Background

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 is a nationwide initiative to assess the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). For the first time, REF 2014 introduced the wider impact of research, alongside the quality of research and the vitality of the research environment, into the assessment of research excellence in UK HEIs. The impact of research is weighted at 20% of the total assessment for 2014, as it is important to recognise wider societal benefits resulting from publicly funded research.

Understanding how the impact element of the REF 2014 submission process worked for HEIs and research users will be important for future rounds of assessment.

Goals of evaluating the **preparation** process

The UK higher education funding councils asked RAND Europe to evaluate the submission process undertaken by HEIs in preparing for the impact element of REF 2014. This formative evaluation aimed to:

- describe the perceived benefits and burdens to HEIs and research users in preparing their impact submissions;
- identify intended and unintended consequences of assessing research impact for different institutions and disciplines;
- formulate evidence-based conclusions and recommendations for improving the processes of preparing submissions for impact assessment; and
- highlight notable practices for institutions, research users, the funding councils and other stakeholders.

Approach

For this study we worked with 21 HEIs to understand their experience of the impact submission process, and we consulted with three broad stakeholder groups over the course of the evaluation:

- HEI research leadership teams;
- HEI impact case study subjects and authors; and
- non-academic research users.

A mixed-methods approach was used, including site visits, face-to-face and telephone interviews, online surveys and a 'benefit:burden' analysis, to produce robust conclusions and recommendations.

Our findings are shaped by documented institutional experiences. They identify practices that HEIs highlighted as notable and that may support stakeholders' impact submissions for the impact element of future rounds of assessment. In combination with our evaluation of the assessment process for REF 2014 (see www.randeurope.org/REF2014impact), this work will inform policy development for the next REF exercise.

The benefit and burden of assessing research impact as part of REF 2014

- Participants saw a number of benefits from the increased focus on the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014, along with other policies (such as Research Councils UK's *Pathways to impact*) and the broader 'impact agenda'.
- The assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 was a significant new burden for HEIs.

Attitudes to and consequences of assessing research impact as part of REF 2014

- As a result of the impact agenda and changing culture, HEIs are changing their practices.
- There was as much diversity of views and attitudes towards the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 **within** HEIs as there was **between** them.
- The impact case studies submitted may not be representative of the actual impact of research occurring within HEIs.
- There is a concern that the impact agenda may begin to undermine 'blue skies' research.

Implementing the assessment of research impact as part of REF 2014

- HEIs were able to identify and articulate their impact as part of REF 2014. However, views on guidance from the higher education funding bodies for demonstrating research impact ranged widely, from full support to great concern.
- The biggest challenges (and burdens) in preparing impact case studies were the requirement to 'evidence' impact and the need to develop an understanding of the concept of impact.
- HEIs perceived that the exercise had put an undue burden on research users, although this was not their experience.
- There was uncertainty about how panels would assess impact and this led to unease in the sector.

Improving the preparation and submission process for future REF exercises

- There is a strong desire among HEIs for the higher education funding councils to indicate as soon as possible whether and how impact will be assessed for the next round of the REF.
- There were examples of notable practices that HEIs identified as supporting the preparation of the impact element of REF 2014 submissions.

This research brief describes work documented in *Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation; Approach and evidence*, by Catriona Manville, Molly Morgan Jones, Marie-Louise Henham, Sophie Castle-Clarke, Michael Frearson, Salil Gunashekar and Jonathan Grant, RR-726-HEFCE, 2015 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR726) and in *Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation; Findings and observations*, by Catriona Manville, Molly Morgan Jones, Michael Frearson, Sophie Castle-Clarke, Marie-Louise Henham, Salil Gunashekar and Jonathan Grant, RR-727-HEFCE, 2015 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR727).

The research was conducted by RAND Europe and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Scottish Funding Council.

manville@rand.org

RAND Europe is a not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © Copyright HEFCE 2015

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights: This document and trademark(s) therein are protected by law. This document is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorised posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is required from the copyright holder to reproduce, or reuse in another form, this document for commercial use.

RB-9833-HEFCE



WESTBROOK CENTRE
MILTON ROAD
CAMBRIDGE CB4 1YG
UNITED KINGDOM
TEL +44.1223.353.329
FAX +44.1223.358.845

RUE DE LA LOI, 82
1040 BRUSSELS
BELGIUM
TEL +32.2.669.2400
www.randeurope.org