

Background

In his evaluation of the REF, Lord Stern identified a need to develop 'a richer picture of the impact of research which encompasses the research expertise, facilities and networks of an individual, group or institution that underpin or lead to the eventual impact of research'. He therefore recommended that impact could be linked to a research activity and a body of work as well as to a broad range of research outputs. This recommendation found broad support in the subsequent consultation on the REF and was included by the four funding bodies in their 'Initial Decisions on REF 2021' ([REF 2017/01](#)).

However, the consultation raised several questions around the implementation of this broadening of underpinning research. In particular, guidance was requested around the research activities that would be eligible, and on how research activities and bodies of work would be assessed and audited.

Questions

In order to understand the types of underpinning research that may fall into this category, we would like you to think back to 2014 and identify any case studies that your institution would have submitted, had the definition of underpinning research included research activities and bodies of work. What would those case studies have looked like?

Eligible activities

Responses to the consultation intimated that clear and specific guidance would be required in order to give institutions confidence in submitting case studies based on research activities and bodies of work.

- Can you provide examples of what should constitute an eligible research activity, in your view? What activities should be excluded?
- How did you differentiate between eligible and ineligible activities?

Assessment

It was noted in the consultation that broadening the definition of underpinning research beyond outputs would pose several challenges to the panels and funding bodies when assessing and auditing the case studies.

The initial decisions on REF 2021 confirmed that impacts should be underpinned by excellent research, with 'excellent' research continuing to mean the quality of the research is at least equivalent to two star. In REF 2014, this meant that underpinning research was judged against the criteria already in place for assessing submissions to the output sub-profile, which identified two star outputs as demonstrating 'quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour'. However, the inclusion of non-output-based research will require additional thought. Bearing in mind the examples gathered above, please consider the following questions:

- What would constitute a two-star research activity or body of work? How could it be assessed against the three criteria of 'originality, significance and rigour'?

- What types of evidence – beyond references to outputs – could be provided to demonstrate research excellence?

Audit

The 'Initial Decisions' confirmed that impacts will remain eligible for submission by the institution or institutions in which the associated research has been conducted. The document also established that the excellent research underpinning impact case studies must have been produced during the period from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020 across all UOAs. This poses some challenges when the underpinning research is not associated with a specific output.

- In REF 2014, eligibility of underpinning research was determined by the date at which the output first became publicly available. How can it be demonstrated that research activities and bodies of work, which are frequently characterised by ongoing activity, took place within the REF 2021 timeframe?
- Similarly, what evidence might be required from submitting units to demonstrate that the underpinning research was undertaken at their institution? This is particularly relevant where the body of work is undertaken by several researchers across multiple institutions over a period of time.