

## **Notes from impact workshop on continuing case studies and submitting research activities and bodies of work**

18<sup>th</sup> January 2018, London

### **A: Background**

In September 2017, the funding bodies set out a number of high-level policy decisions for REF 2021 ([REF 2017/01](#)). These included a decision that case studies continued from examples submitted in 2014 will be eligible for submission in REF 2021, and the adoption of Lord Stern's recommendation that impact could be linked to research activities and bodies of work as well, as to a broad range of research outputs.

In the document, we also set out our plans to consult further on issues related to these decisions. The discussions at this workshop, guided by the related discussion papers, will feed in to the development of the guidance on submissions, and will inform main and sub-panels' development of the panel criteria. The draft criteria will be published for consultation in summer 2018.

### **B: Panel discussion**

Following a brief introduction from the Deputy REF Manager, three main panel chairs (A – Professor John Iredale; C – Professor Jane Millar; D – Professor Dinah Birch) took part in a brief panel discussion, chaired by Steven Hill, Chair of the REF Steering Group. The panel was asked to offer a disciplinary perspective on impact, reflecting on their experience in REF 2014 and identifying the opportunities and challenges for impact in REF 2021.

Speaking more broadly, the chairs highlighted the importance of providing guidance that is clear and detailed but includes enough flexibility to enable institutions to submit the broadest range of underpinning materials. All three agreed that whilst the panel criteria need to be sensitive to disciplinary differences, the main panels will need to reassure HEIs that there will be consistency of approach on key issues. They are aware that institutions frequently demonstrate risk aversion in their approach to impact and reflected that guidance would only be able to reduce this, rather than eradicate it altogether. Close engagement with subject communities was highlighted as a crucial step in ensuring that the criteria are appropriately understood and the potential for misunderstanding was minimised. The chairs also stated that the development of the criteria should be grounded in clear statements of principles.

Addressing additionality, the chairs stressed that they were keen to ensure that continued case studies were neither disadvantaged nor privileged in comparison to new case studies. They identified the risk of extending a linear model of impact, where post-2014 impact is 'tacked on'.

### **C: Continuing case studies**

Further to the decision that case studies continued from examples submitted in 2014 will be eligible for submission in REF 2021, the funding bodies set out the following requirements:

- all continued case studies will have to meet the same eligibility criteria as new case studies, including timeframes;
- submitting units will need to identify continued case studies in the case study template;
- continued or developed case studies will need to provide evidence of additionality to the example submitted in 2014.

## Key questions:

- What defines a continued case study?
- Which of the examples provided in the discussion paper demonstrate additionality? Why?
- Are there any examples that do not demonstrate additionality?
- To what extent are different types of additionality appropriate for different types of impact?
- What guidance would your institution require to help them to (i) identify a continued case study and (ii) determine whether a case study demonstrated additionality?
- What information should panels receive on continued case studies (e.g. coversheet, additional evidence)?

### *Summary*

Group discussions and the subsequent plenary session were largely shaped by a debate on the purpose of flagging continued case studies and assessing additionality. There was broad agreement in the room that all case studies – whether continued or new – should be assessed equitably and on their own merit. Several participants suggested that the requirement for impact to fall within the REF 2021 assessment period automatically meant that it was ‘additional’ to that claimed in 2014.

The value of flagging continued case studies was recognised as a useful means of evaluating the vitality and longevity of impact arising from UK research. However, opinion was divided on whether panels should see this information and whether it might usefully be incorporated into the environment statement.

Participants stressed the need for clear guidelines and reassurances to HEIs that continued case studies will not be assessed more or less favourably than new ones. Panels were urged to consider the implications for early career researchers should continued case studies be perceived to be at an advantage. Participants also urged the panels to consider Lord Stern’s recommendation to reduce burden on institutions when determining the requirements for continued case studies.

### *Identifying continued case studies*

Participants were provided with various examples of impact and asked to consider which represented ‘continued’ case studies. There was no clear consensus across the groups about definition of ‘continued’ and whether it should be determined by the underpinning research, the impact, or both. There was also disagreement about the extent to which the funding bodies should establish firm criteria. One group expressed the opinion that institutions required a clear articulation of the threshold between continued and new, while other participants felt that the definition of continuity should be broad and leave institutions with the flexibility to determine themselves whether a case study is continued or new.

### *Flagging continued case studies*

Overall participants supported the tagging of continued case studies as metadata for later analysis of the impact of the UK research base. In order to minimise burden on institutions, there should only be a tick box (or similar), rather than an accompanying narrative. This would also encourage more accurate reporting, as it would be perceived as less onerous. It was suggested that this information could be gathered at submission level, rather than tagging each case study. For example, a coversheet listing the continued case studies with a short rationale for each.

There was no clear agreement on whether it should be a mandatory field and, therefore, subject to audit.

Several groups identified continued case studies as a positive indicator of the sustainability of impact (at unit, institutional and national levels). It was suggested that the environment narrative would offer an appropriate space for units to discuss the approach they take to sustain existing impacts as well as encouraging new ones.

However, a large number of participants expressed the view that this information should not be provided to panels, as it may prejudice their view of the case study. Many participants felt there was no clear value to a panel assessor/member of knowing if the case study was continued from 2014. Others pointed out that the impact narratives themselves would probably reference the 2014 case study where relevant to the 2021 narrative.

#### *Defining additionality*

There was broad agreement that any impact occurring within the REF 2021 assessment period should be regarded as additional to the impacts submitted in 2014 and should therefore meet the requirement of additionality. There was a strong sense that impact should not have to be new, amplified or extended (e.g. to new beneficiaries) to be eligible for submission in 2021. A number of participants also argued that the introduction of new terms ('additionality' and 'continued' case study) was unhelpful and would lead to further confusion within the sector. Should there be a requirement to identify case studies continued from 2014, institutions should simply be asked: is there a relationship with a previous case and, if so, then what is new?

These discussions focused on additionality as a threshold requirement. Further debate centred on the assessment of additionality.

#### *Assessing additionality*

While there was some disagreement on whether continued case studies and additionality should be flagged, there was broad consensus that it should not be assessed separately. The majority of participants expressed the view that the window for impact and underpinning research would prevent the submission of 'absurdly historical' case studies. Attention was drawn to the fact that case studies submitted in 2014 were not required to identify impact that began before the assessment period (i.e. pre-2008) and that this was not felt to have been problematic.

The assessment, it was argued, should focus solely on the reach and significance of the impact in the 2021 assessment period, rather than judge it comparatively with the 2014 case study. Participants were keen to distinguish between 'eligible' and 'strong' impact, arguing that while continued case studies with little impact in the 2021 assessment period it might be judged as less strong than if there was a new or different kind of impact, it is important that they are not disallowed.

#### *Information provided to panels*

As noted above, there was broad agreement that panels should not be informed whether a case study is continued from 2014. Nevertheless, there was considerable debate at the tables around the information that should be provided to panels *in the case that* they are identified to panels. The REF team reiterated that scores for individual case studies are no longer available and could not be provided to panels.

Discussions focused in particular on whether panels should be provided with copies of the related 2014 case studies. While some felt that this would be useful for panels, concerns were raised about the burden on panel members, should they have to read additional case studies, as well as the practical challenges raised by confidential case studies. There was also a fear that reading the 2014 case study could prejudice the assessment of the 2021 case study, for example, if it were poorly written. One group suggested that the 2014 impact summary might be provided to reduce burden on institutions.

There were differing views on whether units should be required to submit a statement outlining the overlap and additionality. It was suggested that a statement would make it easier for assessors. However, concerns were raised about the additional burden on institutions and panels. Clarity would be required about whether (and how) this statement would be assessed and whether it would be included in the page limit.

#### *Environment template*

Many participants acknowledged the importance of having a mechanism 'to deter HEIs from taking a fossilised approach in which they keep repeating the same case studies'. It was suggested that units should outline in their environment statements their strategy for developing new impact and sustaining a healthy impact pipeline. This was seen to be crucial to demonstrating the broader value of UK research to government and the wider public. An approach that relied heavily on 'historic' impact was also seen to have a potentially negative effect on early career researchers, who may be denied opportunities to develop their own impact. Concerns were expressed specifically in relation to biomedical research which risks being 'swamped by big epoch-changing discoveries' that, while of evident significance, could lead to inertia in the discipline.

## D: Research activities/bodies of work

### Key questions

- How can you differentiate between eligible and ineligible research activities?
- What would define a 2\* research activity/body of work? What evidence could be used to demonstrate that the research meets the quality threshold?
- How can audit establish that research activities and bodies of work were undertaken:
  - within the REF 2021 timeframe?
  - at the submitting institution?
  - What could be done to mitigate the equality and diversity implications?

### Summary

This discussion generated debate about what problem this recommendation was intended to solve and whether a new policy was, in fact, required in order to fulfil Lord Stern's aim to recognise the diverse pathways to impact. There was broad agreement that the issue was *not* the definition of underpinning research in REF 2014 but the perceived need to link impact to specific outputs (often in a linear fashion). While there was no requirement in 2014 to link impacts directly to specific outputs, many HEIs interpreted the guidance in this way. Clear messaging and more explicit guidance was seen to be an effective solution.

"The group were at first, and before the meeting, keen to see this broadening and all agreed there was anecdotal evidence before this session suggesting impact case studies might have been missed because of this issue. However on exploring this further, it was clear that the risk aversion of HEIs in not using the full breadth of output types offered in previous REF exercises was really the fault here."

### *Defining eligible 'research activities'*

The discussions around the research activities which could be eligible were wide-ranging. Many participants expressed the opinion that research activity should be associated with something new. Rather than, for example, simply belonging to an existing committee, it should encompass 'processes of generating new knowledge'. One group proposed a definition that may be used to describe a broadened underpinning research base: 'evidence of a coherent body of knowledge or practice that is derived from research, has scholarly rigour and enables the transition to impact'. This definition was caveated with the need to unpack the key words (e.g. evidence, coherent, and scholarly rigour).

Participants also offered several examples of research activities that might be eligible to underpin case studies. These included: PhD theses, computer programmes, peer-reviewed grants, network grants, commissioned research, consultancy reports, and policy papers. It was suggested that many of the panels could learn quite a lot from the practice orientated disciplines and perhaps take a broader view on what legitimate underpinning outputs might include.

However, participants were hesitant to advocate a radical departure from the existing definition and were particularly sceptical when it came to disassociating research activities from outputs. Some participants warned that impact should not become a 'dumping ground for loads of uncertain research activity, much of which could be knowledge exchange or outreach'. They raised concerns that there could be a blurring of research and engagement/impact and suggested that activities such as committee membership were esteem indicators, rather than research. They stressed that the impact case study is not the only mechanism by which a unit's

impact and engagement activity is assessed and suggested that the environment statement might be more appropriate for documenting impact arising from broader expertise within a unit. One group suggested that underpinning research could be mix of outputs and experience.

### *Outputs*

Participants reflected on the outputs eligible for submission in REF 2014 and there was some consensus that the list of output types was already very broad, including not just journal articles and monographs, but exhibitions, artworks, digital material, patents etc. One group in particular referenced the output format list provided in REF 2014 and explored a number of related scenarios, and were unable to identify any research related work that could not fit within the existing categories [provide some good examples and distinguish between esteem and research]. This view was reinforced in the plenary session, which also reflected on the ways in which the list could be enhanced for REF 2021 purposes. It was suggested that the addition of a glossary, defining each output type and providing examples, could minimise confusion around eligible outputs and perhaps mitigate the risk-averse approach of HEIs and challenge what was perceived to be a tacit hierarchy of outputs in certain institutions.

In this context, many participants felt that it was not necessary to create new rules but, rather, to providing guidance and reassurance on using the current list of outputs. It was suggested that the panel criteria could usefully encourage HEIs to think creatively about how to package material in the underpinning research section and reassure them that this will be an acceptable format.

### *Role of the researcher*

Several groups discussed the importance of the individual researcher in case studies based on research activities. These discussions were often accompanied by a reservation that this might contradict one of the key principles of the Stern review to shift the focus onto the submitting unit, rather than the individual researcher. It was also recognised that there were potentially equality and diversity implications, as experts were perceived to be predominantly white men and 'established professorial types'. Conversely, one group suggested that the opportunity to facilitate community-based and co-creative research could increase the diversity of representation. Several participants also noted the overlap between the kinds of broader activity suggested in the discussion paper and esteem indicators, leading to the suggestion that these activities might be better captured in the environment statement.

### *Assessment challenges*

It was stressed that research activities and bodies of work should be assessed to the same standard as conventional outputs. However, participants acknowledged the challenges posed by assessing whether research activities and bodies of work meet the two-star threshold when there are not traditional outputs on which to base this decision. It was noted that these difficulties could influence HEIs' reluctance to submit these case studies. Some participants suggested that the two-star requirement be removed for all underpinning research, noting that in REF2014, there were relatively few cases which received a 'U' classification because the research did not meet the quality threshold. However, this was countered with the argument that the purpose of the REF is to assess research excellence and that impact based on low-quality research would fall outside the scope of the exercise.

Participants suggested some potential forms of evidence that could be provided:

- An accompanying narrative addressing the criteria of originality, rigour and significance. It was noted that a clear template would have to be provided to institutions.

- A representative sample of the outputs of the relevant researcher(s), as an example of the quality of their research. As noted above, there was broad consensus that any research activity would be connected to an output of some format.
- Mix of evidence, including successful grants achieved, white papers, industry reports, peer-reviewed publications, and research awards, in addition to traditional outputs.