GuildHE response to:

Consultation on the design of the UK's future research assessment system

06 May 2022

About GuildHE

GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education. Our members are universities, university colleges and other institutions, each with a distinctive mission and priorities. They work closely with industries and professions and include major providers in technical and professional subject areas such as art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture, food and the natural environment; the built environment; education; law; health and sports. Many are global organisations engaged in significant partnerships and producing locally relevant and world-leading research.

Introduction

Our response to the consultation on the design of future research assessment is in full below. We are grateful for members' views which have informed this response.

This consultation forms a key part of the Future Research Assessment Programme, which aims to explore possible approaches to the assessment of UK higher education research performance. It has been initiated at the request of the UK and devolved government ministers and funding bodies. This significant piece of work will be led by the four UK higher education funding bodies:

- Research England
- Scottish Funding Council
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
- Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

Responses to this consultation will be one of the key inputs that shape the future exercise. They will be considered alongside a range of internal and commissioned evaluations, feedback on the current exercise (gathered separately from institutions and individuals), and advice from the programme's international advisory group.

The programme of work is expected to conclude by late 2022.

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Our response

GuildHE and GuildHE Research have welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. The future design of research assessment is incredibly important for our members.

Amongst these institutions there are those which have submitted to the current exercise for the first time, those that return to a single Unit of Assessment (a single or a grouping of similar disciplines), those that are meeting key milestones, such as achieving University Title or preparing applications for Research Degree Awarding Powers, and many which focus their energies on methodologies and types of research, such as practice research, applied research, and translation research which are less prevalent elsewhere.

In short, we respond on behalf of institutions that are atypical in the exercise, and ensuring the assessment is cognisant of their differences is vital to their success. We have drawn upon this diversity to provide a response which we hope offers useful insights and constructive suggestions for the evolution of research assessment in the UK.

In our view future assessments should achieve the following:

- Proportionality of assessment, with more appreciation of institutional context throughout;
- Equitable treatment of all disciplines, people, and institutions;
- Targeted support for developing research environments between exercises, adopting mechanisms that gear investments to enable those growing fastest to sustain, reach their ambitions, and collaborate more effectively with others;
- Embracing broader conceptions of excellence, and a critical reflection on the language used in the system to be more inclusive;
- Prioritise the effect of assessment on research culture, and in particular consider ways the assessment can reward good practices and processes, not just excellence in outputs;
- A higher priority on Environment, to ensure that all institutions can be assessed equitably, judged on their own merits, and be empowered to commit to encouraging positive research cultures that are rewarded for how they work as much as for what they produce.

We look forward to working with the funders in the coming months as they analyse the evidence and develop the assessment design.

Section one: purposes of research assessment

1. ***In addition to enabling the allocation of research funding and providing accountability for public investment in research, which purposes should a future UK research assessment exercise fulfil? Select all that apply.***
    a. ***Provide benchmarking information***
    b. ***Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities***
    c. ***Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation***

d. ***Create a performance incentive for HEIs.***

We suggest b, and c are the key purposes.

2. ***What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?***

There are a range of other purposes that the above list does not encompass, but which could be fulfilled, including:

- Supporting the development of excellence, and reaching new understandings of excellence in different contexts
- Capacity building and sustainability of research environments (see additional comments below at Q7)
- Recognition of support for early career and early stage researchers, where these result in less precarious career paths, and increase stability in career pipelines
- Collective, positive change in research culture, in particular behavioural incentives that favour greater diversity, equality, and inclusion, and the rewarding of good research practice
- Foregrounding current research practices as defined by researchers, to inform and expand understandings of research in other domains, including policy
- Demonstrating achievements and public benefit of disciplines beyond STEM to a greater extent; better leveraging the position of the assessment as the universal assessment of all research
- Incentivising increased embeddedness of sustainability in the context of the human and natural environment as an expectation of research activity

When considering purposes, it is useful to recognise that all assessments systems will have elements that affect research culture positively or negatively

Future exercises could also align more explicitly with global agendas, including those in Europe, such as providing evidence for engagement in funding programmes such as Horizon Europe. The scoring applied in current exercises refers to international significance, yet this is essentially a UK assessment of that. Whilst that was possibly an acceptable phrasing in previous exercises, there has been significant shifts in the discourse, as well as an acknowledgement that such a UK-centric view is detrimental to diversity, equality and inclusion; in short a future exercise could more intentionally and inclusively position UK research within a diverse global research community.

3. ***Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.***

The current assessment does result in as near to meritocratic outcome as possible. It offers recognition to pockets of excellence within institutions with a less developed research culture in ways that other measures, such as the allocation of research council funding, do not. The assessment also allows for the distinctive contributions of the different units to emerge, and for diverse approaches to research to be articulated and evidenced.

There are examples in the research and innovation system where alternative approaches are taken to assess what is a very diverse and multifaceted sector. The KEF has gone furthest to align institutions by groups, in an attempt to identify strength and capacity in knowledge exchange within a 'peer group' with aligned characteristics. It may be possible to strike a similar balance in the assessment of research, however the KEF remains unlinked to funding and so the capacity of this approach to deliver an equitable and meritocratic result in financial allocations is not proved.

Benchmarking based on REF information is of limited value, particularly for institutions submitting into a single UoA, or submitting for the first time. It can be helpful in managing expectations and setting ambitions or targets, but in trying to benchmark against the majority of the sector, smaller and specialist institutions are comparing apples and pears. There is typically less stability in this part of the sector; the research environment can grow significantly between exercises and render previous results as a touchstone but with little relationship to the current situation; and significant shifts can happen in a submission due to changes at the institution, even as seemingly minor as the movement of a single individual, due to the smaller scale of operation. The latter can remove a whole UoA from one exercise to the next, and could be read in a very detrimental way by those with less understanding of how teaching intensive, research active institutions operate.

For similar reasons, performance incentives for smaller and specialist institutions are perhaps stronger elsewhere in the research system, such as in working towards achieving Research Degree Awarding Powers (RDAP), acquiring equitable roles in research grants, and entering into collaborations with both similar and very different institutions.

Perhaps there is a lesson here in what the funders and others in the research community could provide as incentives for all institutions to stimulate good practices that reside outside of this assessment. For example, RDAP provides an opportunity to rigorously demonstrate good research practices, engagement across the institutional community, valuing all members of that community, and having structures in place that tie teaching, research, and knowledge exchange activities together in meaningful ways. It is a process of critical self reflection and data gathering which is not formalised outside of this process, once powers are granted. In addition, models could emerge from teaching quality assurance, which is devolved to HEIs. This might provide the seed of a hybrid model of research assessment which straddles an internal quality assurance review and external peer review.

4. ***Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?***

We appreciate the difficulties faced by UKRI in finding a model that suits all HEIs and recognise the benefits the assessment brings to smaller and specialist institutions. All assessment systems will affect research culture, and it will be important for the funders to be intentional about those effects - for example, the kinds of outputs and impact that those assessed are going to be driven towards by the guidance given - and to put measures in place to check that the resulting research culture shifts are positive and desirable.

The purpose should be proportionate to the effort, and enable HEIs to best showcase their research excellence on terms that are relevant to their scale, scope, and nature. It could be well argued that a future exercise needs to both a) acknowledge that the notion of a level-playing field for all institutions is a fantasy and b) that research activity does not exist in a vacuum, and therefore other commitments need to be taken into account.

The current exercise has encouraged a swathe of dedicated roles, consultancies, additional support packages, becoming almost an industry in its own right. This is problematic, and embeds inequalities in the system; those institutions that are most well resourced will continue to have more capacity to enhance their submissions and invest in specific support to do so, most of which will be out of reach both financially and logistically for smaller, specialist and teaching intensive institutions. We therefore strongly advocate that all decisions made about a future system should consider how the exercise can be made more equitable for the full diversity of institutions in the HE sector.

Section two: setting priorities

5. ***To what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 9 (least important)***
    a. ***Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.***
    b. ***Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)***
    c. ***Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate***
    d. ***Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development***
    e. ***Impact of the system on research culture***
    f. ***Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing***
    g. ***Maintaining continuity with REF 2021***
    h. ***Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance***
    i. ***Robustness of assessment outcomes***

Priority	Descriptor
	Robustness of assessment outcomes
	Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate
	Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance
	Maintaining continuity with REF 2021
	Impact of the system on research culture
	Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises)
	Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.

	Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development
	Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing

We did not answer this question, see below

6. ***Relating to research culture, to what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)***
    a. ***Impact of the assessment system on research careers:***
    b. ***Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion:***
    c. ***Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations)***
    d. ***Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research***
    e. ***Impact of the system on open research***
    f. ***Impact of the system on research integrity***

Priority	Descriptor
	Impact of the assessment system on research careers:
	Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion:
	Impact of the system on research integrity
	Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations)
	Impact of the system on open research
	Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research

We did not answer this question, see below

7. ***What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? Please set out the considerations and indicate where they should be located in the list of priorities.***

We have not given priorities as there was no strong consensus from members. Ranking the choices above requires the comparison of largely incomparable things, and the prioritisation of crucial factors of any healthy research culture - people, equality of opportunity and treatment, and good research practices - which are inextricably linked. We welcome feedback to the sector on how these answers will be used to inform the FRAP.

1. Ability of the system to promote vitality, sustainability, and capacity in research environments of all kinds

The assessment system can promote sustainability of research environments between exercises much more effectively than it currently does.Smaller and specialist research environments are atypical. They change in scale at a greater rate than other institutions between exercises. The time lag between exercises causes a disconnect between the environment the funding is based on and the actual reality, and that becomes more pronounced as time goes on. This is part of the system that needs addressing. It leaves a range of diverse institutions in a challenging status quo with relatively static funding; they are out of step with their own rate of growth; it stymies both their potential and capacity to compete for additional funds; it is hard to keep pace with developing technologies and infrastructure, which take up an increasingly large proportion of available funds. This makes it harder to compete *and* collaborate with much more developed research intensive institutions. We have previously suggested that there should be a gearing of investment between exercises to support their development more equitably - see Recommendation 92, [Balance and effectiveness of research and innovation spending, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2019]

Institutions not supported to grow sustainably will remain locked out of existing cycles of ‘funding following funding’, a bias that exists in our research funding system; funded research is further supported by finance which is otherwise unobtainable, creating a cycle whereby having grants increases the likelihood of getting more funding, and increases the institutions’ and researchers’ capacity to apply and achieve success.

2. Ability of the system to promote the contribution of research to civic life’.

Civic labour and contributions to public life through work with publishers and journals, funding bodies and disciplinary organisations is a key part of a socially responsible research culture. The recognition of this work is minor and there needs to be a greater focus on its values in promoting a trusted research culture. Departmental or unit contributions to changing disciplines, to national discussions, to sector organisations could and should be better recognised.

Finally future assessment design should address and reflect the ways in which these priorities intersect. They are not discrete, once played out in the reality of an institution. The last exercise sent out mixed messages; on the one hand prioritising EDI and research integrity, whilst reducing the weighting of the environment part of the exercise where such commitments are best explained and justified.

8. ***How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research Culture?***

A positive research culture is one in which all those involved are valued, recognised, and rewarded for their contributions, and in which equality, diversity and inclusion is not only prioritised but firmly embedded in policies, processes and outcomes. Such issues of equitability relate to the people involved in research, the disciplines of enquiry, and institutions. Diversity, in all these aspects, should be upheld as a positive contributor to original research that addresses real world challenges. Bad practice should not be brushed aside simply to reward an excellent output.

People

Considerable effort was made in previous exercises to address equality, diversity and inclusion through the guidance and structures put in place. Some of these were in practice challenging to deliver, especially when returning a small submission to the exercise. We recommend the following to improve this:

1. Equitable access to specific EDI training has to be provided to all.
2. Structures and policies required as part of the code of practice should be tested as to whether they can be applied effectively in a small research environment.
3. Guidance should not expose the requirements of individual academics, just because they work at a small organisation that cannot rely on scale to avoid requiring special circumstances.

A future assessment needs to be one in which researchers feel valued and supported, we fear at present the prevailing sense that the assessment is done to them, rather than with them.

Disciplines
In research disciplines there remain Unit of Assessment groupings that give an impression that some subjects are less valid than others in terms of assessing research quality (e.g. UoA 33) as they combine such disparate fields. These are grouped in a way that belies a lack of appreciation, and by extension value, of the differences between their methodologies and approaches. This sends a negative message to subjects that don't fit the mould. There is an opportunity here to reassess such conventions, and objectively consider where there may be historical biases in the structure of the exercise which put primacy on STEM and subjects where outputs, outcomes, and impact are more conveniently assessed.

Institutions
It is of key importance that a system is devised that does not inadvertently favour research intensive institutions simply due to their disciplinary range and foci, intensity of research, critical mass of resource and researchers, scale of operation. Guidance should be set early and tested on diverse types of institutions to avoid this.

In future exercises we encourage more explicit appreciation of the different structures and environments that exist in the sector, which may be achieved through a more prominent role for Environment. A commendable feature of the exercise is the ability of all institutions to participate and be assessed by their peers. Diversity is a great strength for the culture of research and more could be done to support it. Ensuring that institutions are assessed on their own merits, as relevant to their nature, scale, and scope of operation, would help encourage diversity in the sector.

Section three: identifying research excellence

9. ***Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise? (Multiple options: 'Should be heavily weighted' – 'Should be moderately weighted' – 'Should be weighted less heavily' – 'Should not be assessed' – 'Don't know')***
    a. ***Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers)***

b. ***Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards)***
c. ***Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets)***
d. ***Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward)***
e. ***Engagement beyond academia***
f. ***Societal and economic impact***
g. ***Other (please specify).***

Descriptor	*Should be heavily weighted*	*Should be moderately weighted*	*Should be weighted less heavily*	*Should not be assessed*	*Don't know*
Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers)			1		
Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards)	1				
Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets)	1				
Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward)		1			
Engagement beyond academia		1			
Societal and economic impact	1				
Other (please specify).					

10. ***Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?***

Current definitions of excellence tend to favour research intensive institutions and established researchers working in disciplines that are traditionally associated with research. It also puts primacy on certain types of output, marginalising some on which certain disciplines rely. It can be challenging for both institutions and individual researchers to see a pathway for their development and it can devalue their efforts. The contribution of early stage researchers, post-doctoral researchers, as well as technicians and professional research support staff are less well recognised. For institutions submitting at an early stage of development of their research environment, the expectations and requirements of the exercise are daunting at best, baffling at worst. There needs to be better alignment between current ambitions to improve research culture and value all contributions, and the message sent by the existing exercise that anything below 3* is essentially valueless.

Conceiving of excellence as a process, rather than a discrete end point, might be one way to overcome that tension and include more individuals and institutions more positively in the assessment. Certainly, in the case of the 'Environment' element of the submission, this involves a series of intersecting factors that lead to good research - research integrity, espousing a positive culture, policies and processes, enacting those policies, developing researchers and teaching new researchers -and good management of these cultivate a robust and sustainable research environment. The options given above do not seem to acknowledge much of that effort and diligent work, yet these are the behaviours and activities that contribute most to research culture. We would also welcome consideration of institutional context; many smaller environments demonstrate considerable commitment to open research and researcher development even without significant funds or infrastructure, and there is more scope for this added value to be recognised.

Impact is a welcome addition to the picture, and one which has achieved much in making the case for ongoing and increased investment in research. As we have said elsewhere, this does not exist in a vacuum, and prioritising excellence in processes may help better articulate the relationship between impact and the other parts of the assessment. We would also advocate for more explicit inclusion of notions of excellence when working in partnership with industry and communities. Here there are methodologies which take the emphasis off a single researcher, and put primacy on translation research, peer research, participatory methods, and applied research; these do not always fit with existing definitions of excellence.

In terms of income, we have opted to weigh this less heavily. As we have described above, funding is not equally available to all, and this seems to us a measure which has many inherent biases which are incredibly hard to overcome and disentangle. In our view, it is the effective use of income and proportionality of investments which are pertinent, not the amount or scale of it.

11. ***Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)***
    a. ***Originality***
    b. ***Significance***
    c. ***Rigour***

Yes

12. ***Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?***

These criteria are generally well understood across the sector. To ensure equitable assessment, interpretation and application of these criteria must be open enough to recognise disciplinary and cultural differences. For example, rigour means different things in different disciplines and different cultural traditions, and originality in a creative output will need to be seen in the context of its particular oeuvre, as much as originality in translation research is going to present differently to blue skies approaches. Of all the criteria, significance is perhaps more contentious. Given our previous comment regarding the language of previous assessments, and a tendency to presume the right to decide the definition of subjective judgements like ‘world class’, a future exercise would do well to consider who or what is defining the ‘significance’ of the output. Greater clarity would help here, to avoid the dissuasion of research in more marginalised fields,and to ensure an outputs’ ‘importance’ is judged fairly and appropriately.

13. ***Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don’t know)***
    a. ***Reach***
    b. ***Significance***

14. **Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact?**

Considerable work has been done to align understandings of reach and significance. Whilst impact now seems an established consideration across research disciplines and teams, a shared and consistent understanding of reach and significance remains elusive, and we did not find a consensus amongst our members on this question. There are disparities in the creative arts and humanities, but also amongst researchers working with local and regional communities. There is a lack of trust too, stimulated by a perception that training in impact is variable across the sector, and a sense that some impacts may only do well if an assessor ‘gets it’. Case studies that tended towards measurable and instrumental impacts, and which were deemed less ' risky', were perhaps more likely to be submitted as a result. There is a detriment to the authenticity of disciplines if they are all encouraged down similar routes to create impact because of risk averse and conservative interpretations of the criteria.

For a future exercise it may help to bolster understandings of the quantitative and qualitative evidence that can and should be used to underpin claims made. Further guidance on the kinds of data that have been effectively used in the past to support the kinds of claims that are indicated in guidance documents would help to ensure that data gathering is prioritised and effectively targeted by institutions. There is scope within impact for much wasted energy and time; more can be done to enable institutions to work together to understand what good practice looks like.

The increased weighting of impact in the 2021 assessment was a welcome change when announced; unfortunately due to the instability created by the pandemic this part of the exercise has become incredibly unpredictable. For smaller submissions this unpredictability is potentially detrimental, and potentially moreso for institutions entering the exercise for the first time. It has been argued to us that, due to the long period of assessment, the impact of the pandemic will be evened out, yet for developing research environments we still do feel they were at a distinct disadvantage as compared to more established research intensive institutions as the likelihood of case studies being affected would be greater.

It is hard to see how research with more modest reach, but great significance, can perform well in assessment in comparison to research related to such a global event; the impact will inevitably be more impressive on both counts. We therefore wonder how the assessment can continue to support the full diversity of research and the full range of potential impacts, if there is a trend to foreground that which is more instrumental and 'big ticket' over other valid impacts that may be of equal importance but to a smaller or more localised community. An indication of 'intensity' of impact could be helpful here, or something along similar lines that counters the sense that 'reach' is achieved through a spatial extent.

Finally, reflecting on language, using significance in the criteria of both outputs and impact has some shortcomings and can lead to confusion. Fulsome explanations of what is meant in each domain with examples or prompts would enable submissions to achieve more clarity and alignment with the intent of the guidance. We also note research done into the gendered language of impact, and encourage critical reflection on this.

15. **Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)**
    a. **Vitality**
    b. **Sustainability**

16. **Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?**

The criteria are somewhat clear, in that they both are recognisable characteristics of a healthy environment for research. However, we have some misgivings about how these criteria can be applied equitably, and in proportion with institutions' realities. Often institutions feel judged on criteria which are out of proportion to their scale, based on unattainable expectations, or which are irrelevant to them.

In general, smaller institutions and those returning to one or a very small number of UoAs are disadvantaged by the current approach to research environment. In the last exercise there was considerable confusion around the institutional level environment statement, and many institutions spent considerable time on fairly unnecessary repetition. All institutions submitting to a small number of UoAs (e.g. under 5), where 'environment' is likely to occur at an institutional level, should have the option to represent their environment in the most appropriate way, rather than submitting additional forms for the convenience of the assessors.

It can be a challenge to demonstrate 'sustainability' in a way that feels comparable to institutions that are more research intensive or have established themselves in research for a longer period. Small and emerging research environments will not have recourse to large amounts of funds, and may look very different in terms of the personnel involved, priorities set, and the infrastructure that is present. We would advocate for more explicit consideration of how well QR investments have been utilised, and less prominence given to metrics such as income and completions. At present it is challenging for smaller institutions to demonstrate sustainability; there needs to be context informed assessment that shows where value is added based on the resource available.

In terms of vitality, this is open to more interpretation as it is arguably more subjective; further clarity on what is meant by this word would be advantageous in future exercises. For those new to the exercise and those with an emerging culture of research 'vitality' is going to look very different, and in some ways seem rather basic and underwhelming compared to a much more established research environment. And yet it is the basics, the foundation work which is going to support good research in the long term. A qualifying statement which grounds vitality in tangible activities would be helpful, for example the effort that an institution makes to encourage, stimulate or galvanise research both internally and externally.

As a consortium we work hard to support institutions through shared services, value-add activities for doctoral students and ECRs, and a collegiate peer network, and we encourage our members to reflect on that in their submissions. How such collaborative activities are viewed by the assessors remains unclear however, and there is a sense in the terms used and the nature of the exercise that it is 'each institution for itself'. In addition, for teaching intensive research active institutions, acknowledgement of how research informs, connects with, and learns from teaching and knowledge exchange would be advantageous. Activities such as student engagement with research are hugely valuable in these contexts, for the institutional environment, access to research careers, and pedagogy. It is not clear if such acytivities would hold weight in the current assessment.

Section four: assessment processes

17. **When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:**
    a. **Stability**
    b. **currency of information**
    c. **both a. and b.**
    d. **neither a. nor b.**
    e. **Don't know.**

C - both a and b

18. **Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information?**

We have addressed some of our reflections on stability and currency of information in Q19 below. In our view, these two ideas are not in opposition to each other.

The assessment is one tool for the funders to engage the full diversity of the sector, and on which to make decisions. Having a regular, reliable, stable, and recognisable assessment has great benefits. It reduces bureaucracy and wasted effort, it provides structure, and allows for comparison between assessments. That said, we do not think past exercises have been perfect, and there will always be new technologies, understandings, and cultural shifts that will need to be accommodated in future iterations. The ‘sweet spot’ should reduce administrative burden but not create an environment which promotes inequality, casualisation or other unhealthy practices.

We think the funders have other tools for currency of information, such as institutional engagement teams, and data collection exercises, and a large scale assessment is probably not the place or method to achieve it. In addition, a current picture taken at any one point during a seven year cycle will always be snapshots of activity. It may provide some useful intelligence, but should larger decisions be based on them we would have grave misgivings, as that would be easily gamed and encourage practices we all work hard to avoid in the name of research integrity.

19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?
   a. Yes, split by main panel
   b. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)
   c. No
   d. Don’t know.

C - No

20. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

We would welcome a reconfiguring of the timeframe and rigidity of the current research assessment exercise, although we would not necessarily welcome a rolling assessment on a very frequent (i.e. annual) basis, and remain sceptical that institutions would cope well or perform well on even a slightly longer rolling basis.

Our reservation centres on burden. For smaller and specialist institutions, and those which are teaching intensive but research active, there needs to be a balance between the administrative time devoted to the three domains of activity: teaching, research and knowledge exchange. We believe a rolling REF would disadvantage these institutions; it would be challenging to time an assessment in such a way that other activities wouldn’t need to take priority. Indeed, considering the broader landscape, how institutions would keep pace with a rolling assessment and make use of opportunities emerging from policy, such as levelling up, is a significant question.

Given the long lead time required for research and impacts, we also question what a rolling REF would provide that would tangibly benefit the assessment or institutions. There are benefits to giving institutions ample time between exercises to make the best use of the opportunity it provides:
- REF can galvanise staff and promote a shared sense of purpose
- it aids with stability and allows those with a developing research capacity to build, to try things out, to take risks

- A long cycle allows those that see large increases in their QR to have the time to devise and implement new strategies based on their new circumstances, and to see them come to fruition
- It enables long term planning and dissuades ‘quick wins’
- Commitments made in the submission can be acted upon, and given time to bear fruit before being assessed once again

There are other shifts in structure of the assessment that we would support to make it less rigid and more appropriate for the full diversity of institutions, which we have described in greater detail at Q7.

21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?
   a. Individual
   b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas
   c. Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes
   d. Institution
   e. Combination of b. and d.
   f. Combination of c. and d.
   g. Other (please specify)

E

22. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise?

The current balance of Units of Assessment and Institution is one we would support, with some modifications:

- There needs to be clearer guidance for and better understanding of the structure of institutions submitting to a single UoA. As we have described at QX the trialling of the Institutional Level Environment Statement in the last exercise was confusing and frustrating for such institutions. We need an exercise that allows all institutions to submit on terms that make sense for them, and design in solutions to accommodate that difference from the outset.
- Interdisciplinary research is increasingly the norm in many research projects and teams, yet remains slightly orphaned by this approach. We risk minimising our understanding of the contribution of IDR if this is not addressed. The Physiological Institute has produced a sound report with recommendations in this area and we recommend this is taken into consideration for future assessment design.
- Portability is also a factor to be considered. It can be a challenge to draw hard and fast lines around the inception of a research idea in some disciplines, and flexibility to allow for this to be recognised is helpful. We understand that this comes with a degree of challenge, given the exercise ultimately results in financial allocation. However, now is the time to consider bold ideas, and perhaps use future exercises to reward collaborative and permeable ways of working across the boundaries of institutions and departments.

We would strongly dissuade the funders from focussing the assessment on individuals. Our members have reported that the decoupling of individuals from outputs in the recent REF enabled better support for individuals (part-time staff and those with special circumstances) and a focus on the unit, thus enhancing collegiality and collaborative working. For institutions with a more diverse research workforce, not only in terms of EDI, and in particular neurodiversity, but also research experience, terms of employment (e,g, part time), and work portfolio, there were considerable benefits to being part of a team / organisation being assessed.

23. **To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)**
    a. **Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment**
    b. **Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:**
        i. **Outputs**
        ii. **Impact**
        iii. **Environment**
    c. **Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:**
        i. **Outputs**
        ii. **Impact**
        iii. **Environment**
    d. **Should not be used at all.**
    e. **Other (please specify)**

E - Other

24. **Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?**

We strongly argue against the wholesale adoption of metrics based approaches. These are not only inappropriate for disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences, they lead to unhelpful tensions in the whole system and impede on parity of esteem.

Whilst metrics may have a place in certain parts of the exercise as they have an established and useful role in helping panels understand significance, we would have considerable reservations about the extension of the use of metrics in the exercise, and for any approach which attempted to adopt the use of metrics as a blanket policy. From our experience of working with institutions submitting to small numbers of UoAs or a single UoA, metrics typically misrepresent the scope of activity, put them at a disadvantage purely due to their scale and size, and crucially blur out the detail of the submission, which in a small research environment is vital in the appreciation of its quality, potential, and ambition. For a great number of disciplines, including the creative arts and humanities, but also for allied health and similar arenas where research is more nascent, metrics are at best partial, at worst misleading, and therefore inappropriate to rely upon.

We are also supportive of an assessment which considers more explicitly the process and practices that lead to the outputs and outcomes, and metrics do not sit well with that view. It is for example difficult to compare the journey and value of trajectories of individuals that do not fit the current understanding of excellence. If we are committed to EDI and inclusive research cultures, we need to value contributions as much as outcomes.

If metrics are adopted, institutions need clarity as soon as possible on what these are and the data that will be required so that it can be collected now. We would welcome consideration be given to non-HESA data which is hugely important in supporting arts research. This should be an indicator used for creative arts subjects.

25. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?

Any assessment involves bureaucracy, and we recognise that there is a certain amount of burden which is largely unavoidable, and is a trade-off for the benefits: a meritocratic allocation of resources, a fair opportunity to submit and and be assessed, and the possibility of having pockets of research excellence revealed and assessed on a par with more developed research organisations. Indeed our research consortium would not exist without such diversity in the system being revealed by an assessment exercise.

There are a number of clear ways in which that burden can be minimised and mitigated. Our overarching plea is for proportionality. It is essential to recognise the full diversity of the organisations involved in research, and to start from a position of designing solutions around that difference rather than a perceived ‘standard institution’.

- Design-in difference: we urge the funders to design guidance and structures that work with the diversity of people, disciplines, and institutions. This can be done through flexibility in structures - a good example from REF 2021 was the range of outputs per FTE research active staff, allowing institutions to accommodate individual needs internally - and by allowing institutions to present themselves authentically, not striving to meet expectations that are unobtainable or irrelevant.
- Guidance to be published in a timely fashion, and in one place. We agree with colleagues across the sector that late publication of guidance, drip feeding of instructions through circular letters, and repetition and inconsistencies in the guidance, caused considerable frustration in previous exercises.
- Clear expectations outlined of the data to be collected, at as early a stage as possible.
- There is a need to balance change with stability; the exercise is burdensome and this can be exacerbated by changes to its structure and parameters. Notwithstanding the changes that were a result of the pandemic, there were significant changes between REF2014 and REF2021 to which institutions had to adapt. This was an additional burden, for all. In our view, these changes were accepted in the hope that future exercises would tweak, but not fundamentally modify the essential structure and guidance.
- Striking a balance between ensuring all institutions are treated equally and proportionality is a challenge. Yet where adjustments were made for smaller environments, such as over institutional level environment statements, there was considerable confusion amongst and pressure on institutions to ‘come into line’ with every other submitting institution, regardless of their size. Future exercises could be more nuanced in the treatment of different scales of institution.

- Provide all institutions with the same opportunity to perform well, in an informed way, on fundamental areas that contribute to positive research culture, such as EDI. The funders are at the cutting edge of policy and debate on these key issues, and as stewards of the system they have a responsibility to support institutions to meet the expectations they set.
- Impact is an important agenda for smaller and specialist universities, and they often perform well. However, there needs to be a more flexible approach that allows institutions that are smaller in scale to submit appropriate proportions of case studies.
- Central negotiations with publishers, such as via Jisc, over Open Access policy requirements.