

# Assessing the quality of research: preparing for REF2021

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In an age where huge amounts of data is collected on everything we do – from our Google searches to our GPS coordinates – we like to be able to count, measure and assess things. This includes measuring the impact and quality of research in the UK, through an assessment method known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The REF measures the quality of research outputs, the impact of research and the research environment. Universities submit case studies to highlight the research they have done and are assessed by a panel. At the end of this long process we have what essentially is a league table, telling individuals and funders which universities are best at research.

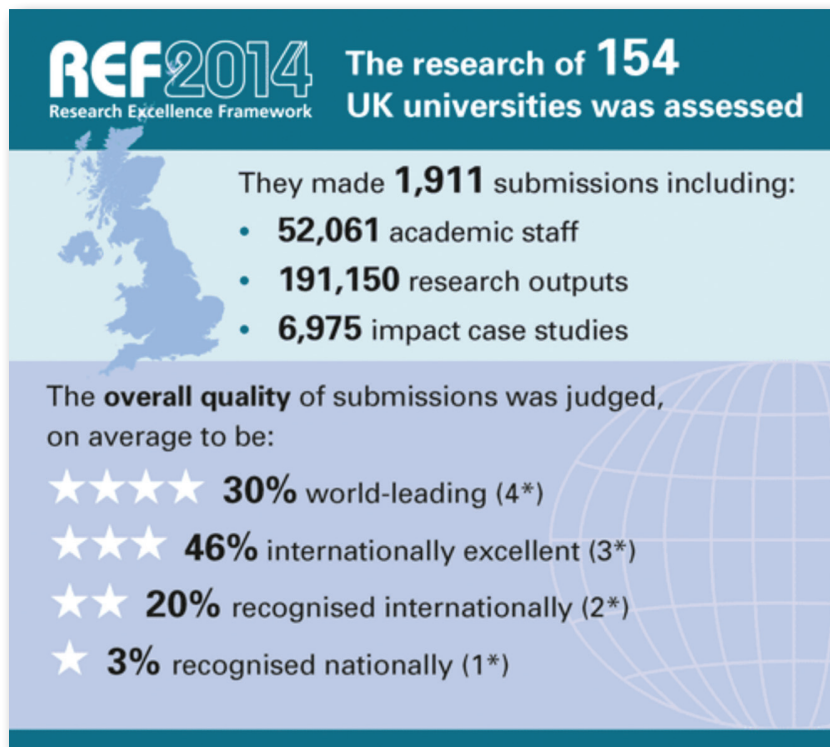
REF2014 is said to have been a rather burdensome exercise – from time and human resource to

monetary costs, which are £246m according to the REF Accountability Review (published July 2015). That and other concerns have led the Government to carry out a review of REF2014 so the process can be improved for the next round, REF2021.

The Stern Review of REF, carried out in July 2016, sets out the purposes of REF, including to develop an evidence base to inform strategic decisions about national priorities; to show the outcome of public investment and make it accountable; to incentivize universities and to provide a reputational benchmark. To summarize, it informs the Government, charities and other funding institutions about where to make investments. Needless to say, it's been a topic of extensive discussion.

While REF has had its critics, many people believe there is still a need for some kind of an assessment. Therefore, in December 2016, the Government launched a consultation to investigate the concerns and opportunities raised by the community in order to inform REF2021.

The Society contributed to the consultation (which is now closed) as part of the Royal Society of Biology's response. We thank everyone who sent in their comments and completed our online survey. One of the recommendations from the Stern Review that raised the most concerns among respondents was the non-portability of research outputs. This essentially means that when the fixed term contract of an academic comes to an end, all research outputs (eg. papers and other publications) will stay behind and will contribute to the REF score of the previous employer as the person moves on. This is a new proposal since in REF2014 researchers were able to take their publications with them to new employers when they changed jobs. The reason the



Taken from REF2014 website ([www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk))

recommendation is there is because there have been concerns about 'poaching' research active academics right before REF so that institutions can return these papers to REF as their own.

Another point raised by our membership was the number of impact studies returned per individual as part of REF assessment. It was suggested that this figure could well be zero for some members of staff if all of them are as part of REF assessment, as some people may only be spending a small proportion of their time on research. There may also be paternity/maternity/caring factors at play that might change an individual's output during the REF period, so setting zero reduces problems of discrimination as they would not be penalised for taking time off work for caring or other responsibilities. On the other hand, if not everybody is subject to REF, then how objective will be submissions be?

Finally, while it is tempting to assess research and teaching separately, these elements are intertwined and incentivising research has the potential to affect the quality of teaching. Helen Watson, Chair of the Biochemical Society's Training Theme Panel and a lecturer at the University of Plymouth, commented:

"There is no mention of how to prevent institutions from changing their recruitment and/or promotions policies to favour research intensive staff over teaching intensive staff. By encouraging recruitment and development of researchers, there is a risk that student experience will be damaged as (i) fewer teaching focussed staff may be recruited/developed and/or (ii) research and teaching staff will have more pressure to publish high impact research and may focus less on their teaching responsibilities. It would seem sensible to consider how the TEF and REF may interact in terms of staff development and how institutions can improve both research and teaching quality in parallel."

This consultation has been the topic of many meetings and discussions in academia and outside of it. We will continue to monitor how REF is implemented and feed in our membership's views where appropriate. ■

*Interested in REF? Read Charlotte Dodson's opinion piece on our blog where she explores one of the Stern Review recommendations, portability of outputs, in more detail: [wp.me/p1diOI-165](http://wp.me/p1diOI-165)*

*We are currently recruiting members to our new Policy Network. This is a unique opportunity for you to feed into our policy activities on a variety of issues, including education policy, industry, research funding, EU policy, antimicrobial resistance and equality and diversity. The network is open to all members. To find out more, please email our Science Policy Officer, Gabriele Butkute ([gabriele.butkute@biochemistry.org](mailto:gabriele.butkute@biochemistry.org))*

## Further reading

- **REF2014 website**  
<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>
- **REF Accountability Review: Costs, benefits and burden.** Technopolis, 2015. [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/REF,Accountability,Review,Costs,benefits,and,burden/2015\\_refreviewcosts.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/REF,Accountability,Review,Costs,benefits,and,burden/2015_refreviewcosts.pdf)
- **Research Excellence Framework review**  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review>

