Broader Impact: Changing criteria, changing behaviour

RAND EUROPE

Observations based on our evaluation of the impact element of the REF 2014

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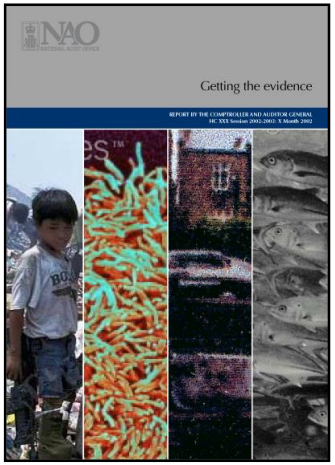
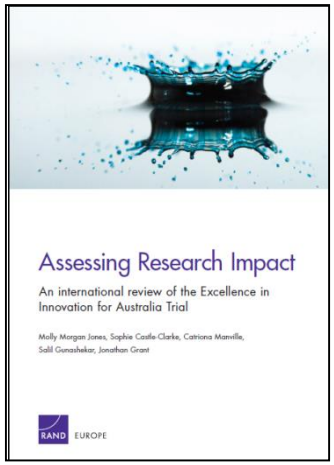
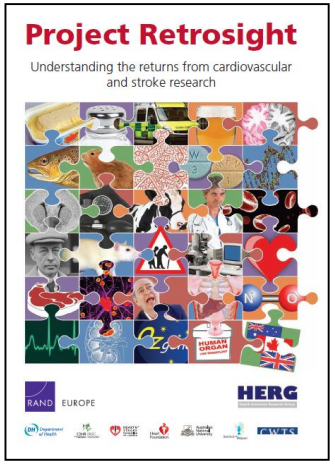
RAND Europe is an independent not-for-profit public policy research institute

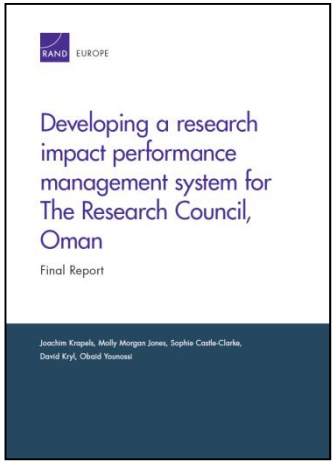
helping to improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis

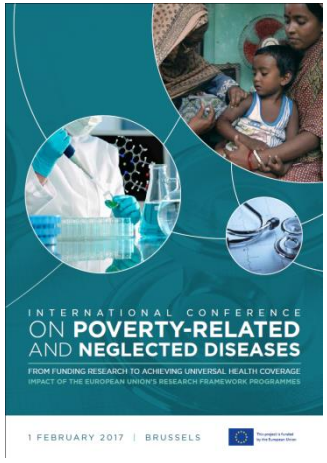
Experience assessing research impact

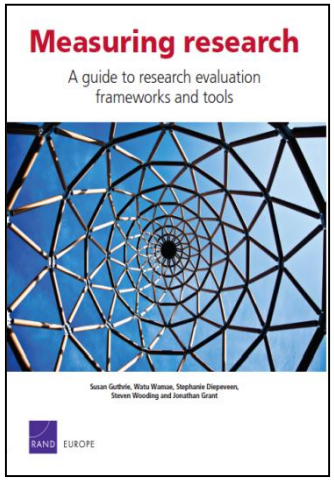




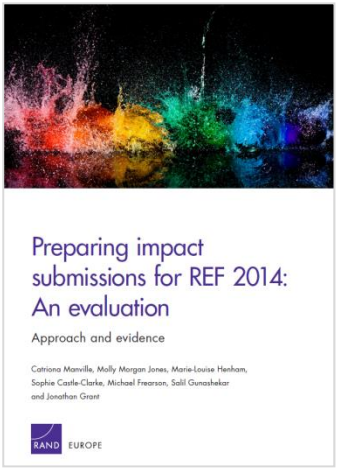


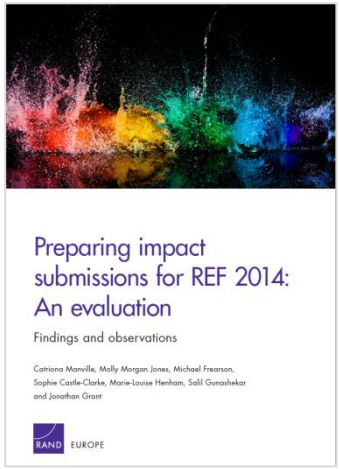


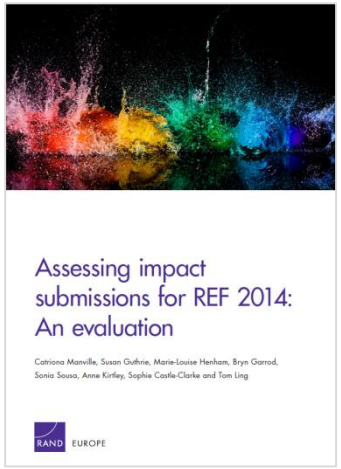


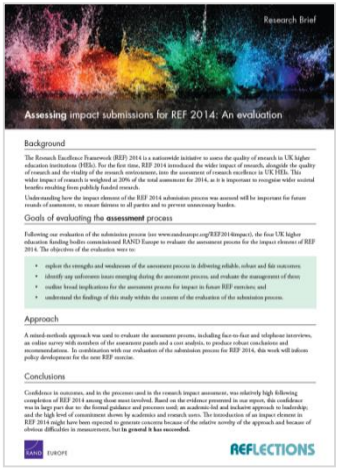


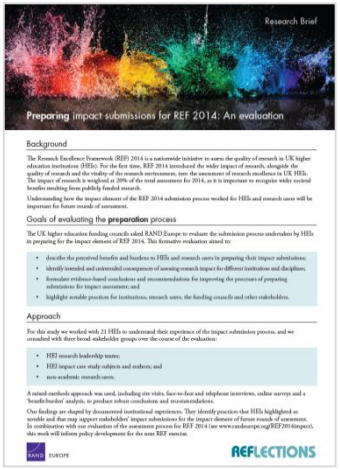
Work on the REF











Available at: www.randeurope.org/REF2014impact

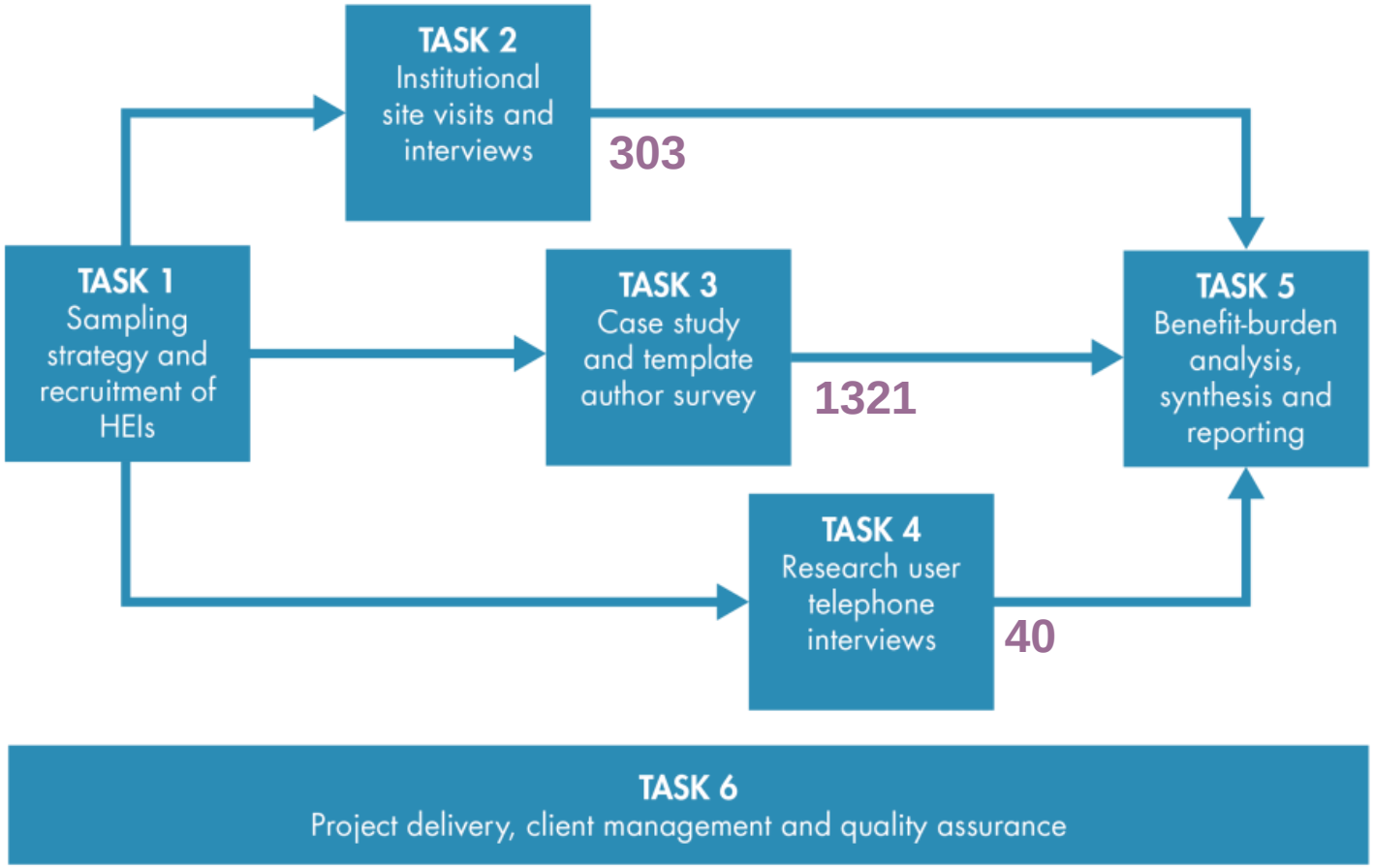
Overall objectives of the evaluation

Review the challenges and perceived benefits of the methodology being implemented

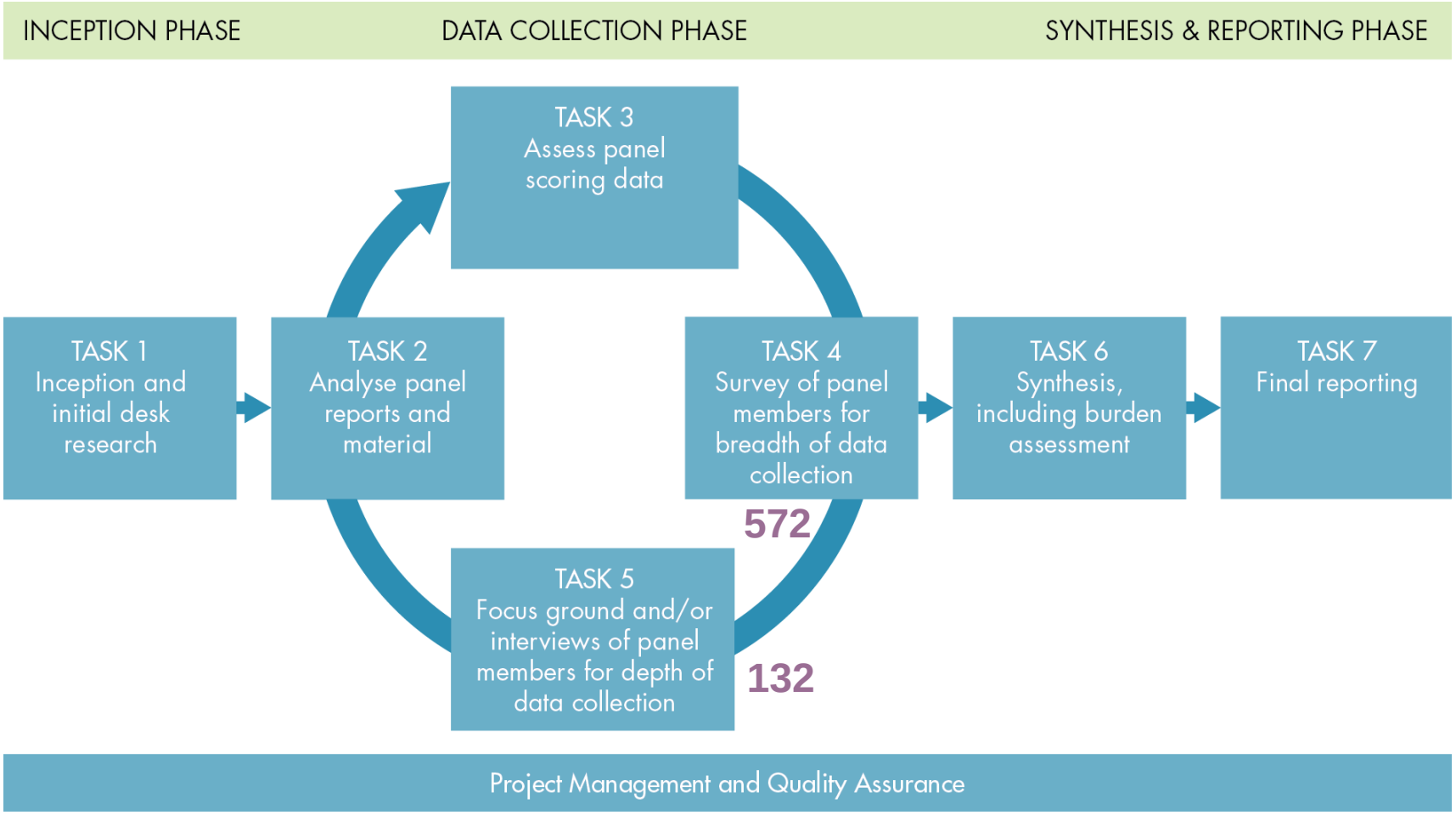
Determine whether it is fit for purpose in meeting the aim for assessing impact

To inform the development of future REF exercises

Methodology – Phase 1

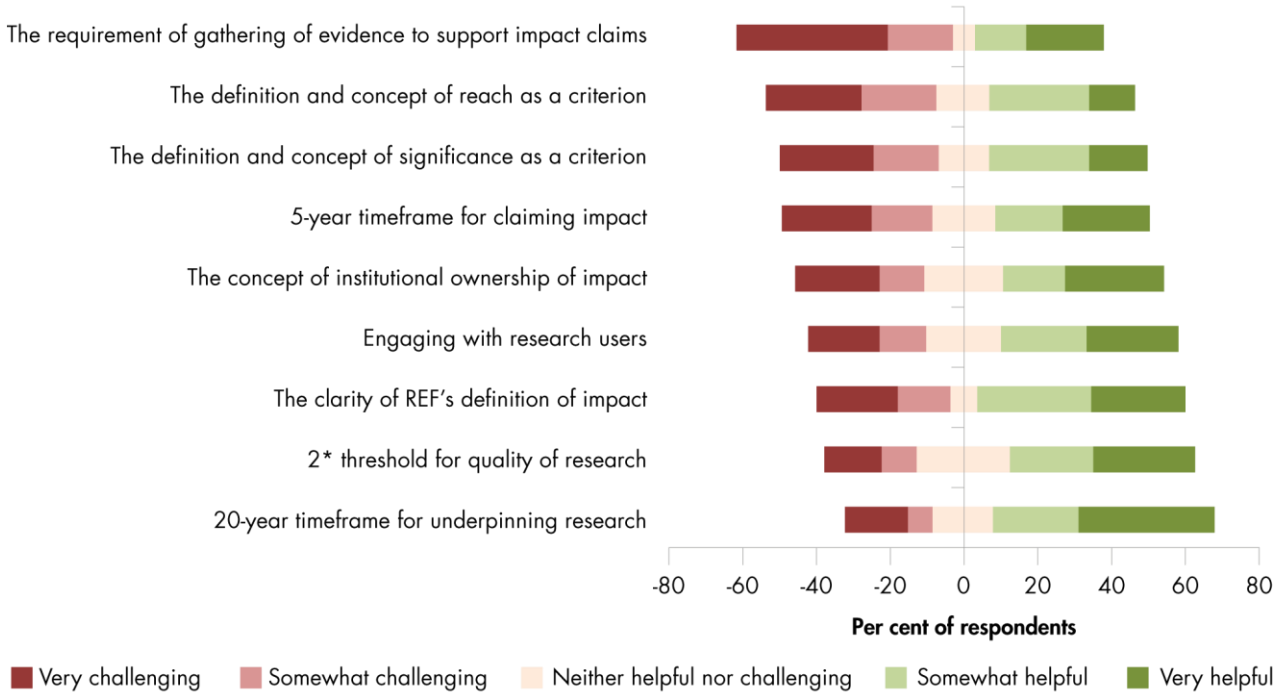


Methodology – Phase 2



HEIs were able to identify and articulate their impact as part of REF 2014. However, there was a range of views on the current rules covering the full spectrum, from support to concern

'We have been able to re-gather and show what has been done when you write it down on paper. The recording has been valuable to stimulate a positive feeling about research, … its potential … and [in particular its] impact.'



There was uncertainty about how panels would assess impact and this led to unease in the sector

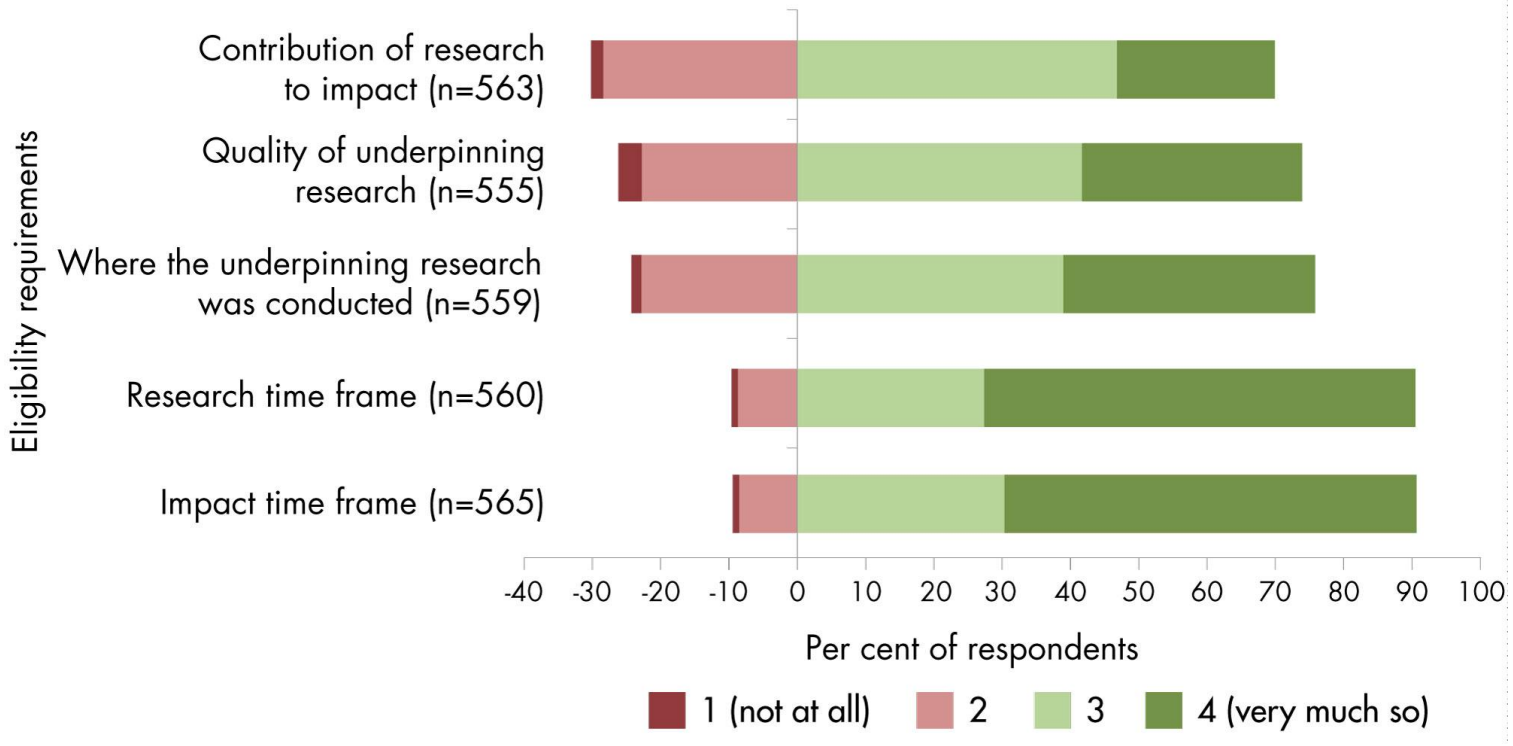
'How the panel is going to [assess impact] is the important thing and how this affects the grading and the reporting and how institutions are seen by others and their peers.'

- There is a concern that rules could be interpreted in different ways and therefore HEIs are uncertain if they interpreted the guidance in line with the panels' interpretation
- There is a need to ensure standardisation
- There is a need for transparency in the process

Panels found underpinning research and its contribution to impact the most difficult part of the assessment process

'Where there was a clear articulation of impact regarding the type of impact made and this was backed up with evidence, the case study was relatively easy to assess.'

- Underpinning research
- Contribution of research to impact



Assessing impact templates was also a challenge

‘There is much to commend [it] although there are improvements to be made and much to be learned.’

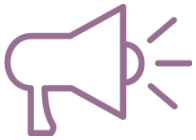
- There were particular challenges in assessing the impact templates
  - Lack of requirement to evidence meant quality of writing had a large effect

- Options for the future:
  - Combine with environment template
  - Use of metrics and factual information
  - Remove it

The impact case studies submitted may not be representative of the actual impact of research in the sector

'It is a sliver of what impact actually is going on. There is still a lot of other impact work that we do which wasn't included'

The definition of impact



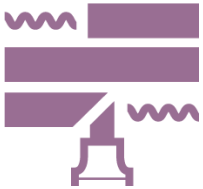
Public engagement

Impact on HEI practice and teaching

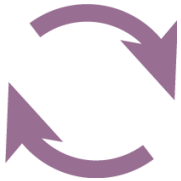
Work undertaken by PhD students

Sufficiency of evidence

Movement of individuals in HEIs/research user organisations



Commercially sensitive or classified evidence



Certain types of impact indicating 'softer' change

There is a concern that the impact agenda may begin to undermine ‘blue skies’ research

‘People are thinking about changing the nature of their research to be more applied. Is this a bad thing? It may be if it damages the underlying blue sky which can develop outstanding impact areas if giving less imaginative science.’

This may result in the focusing of research activities away from blue skies research and to more applied questions

The impact agenda may move research towards areas that can more easily demonstrate impact and away from areas where impact is less easily demonstrated

As a result of the impact agenda and changing culture, HEIs are changing their practice

'REF3A is informing the [impact] strategies that are currently being written'

Setting out an impact strategy

Fixed-term posts becoming permanent

Implementing systems to store evidence of impact

Capturing evidence of impact on an ongoing basis

Building a plan for impact into projects

Inclusion of impact as a criterion for promotion

There is a strong desire by HEIs for the Funding Councils to issue clear guidance on the approach to be adopted for the next round of REF as soon as possible

'HEFCE need to tell us what they want right now'

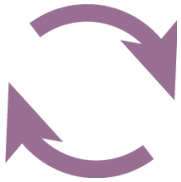
- The sector wants stability for the next REF
- There is a need to announce the rules for the next REF as soon as possible, including any changes

Definition

Evidence gathering

Impact template

A broadly similar approach will be welcomed by the sector



Impact was a success and both HEIs and panel members were supportive of its continued use in the REF

Education and establishing an understanding around the rules and definitions of impact was a significant effort for REF 2014, and HEIs have already started their preparations for 2021.

Broadening eligibility of different types of impact is positive, as long as it is supported by wider guidance

Unless this is supported by guidance around how some types of impact (e.g. public engagement) will be assessed in terms of reach and significance, this is unlikely to change behvaiour

The impact case studies will only (and can only) represent a sample of the activity in the sector, and will be biased towards cases that lend themselves to a narrative description and can be convinicingly evidenced.

A more flexible approach to underpinning research will open up more case studies for submission and make the assessment process more straightforward

However, this will need to be accompanied by clear guidance as HEIs will likely be risk averse in their submissions if this is not fully clarified

The main benefit will be to panel members who found this challenging to review and assess

Piloting institutional level case studies in the first instance is sensible

Most case studies were to some extent interdisciplinary – how will having explicitly interdisciplinary case studies affect this?

How will this be coordinated on both a panel and an institutional level?

Increased emphasis on impact in REF2021

Effects of the increased emphasis on impact are uncertain

Impact was a success and both HEIs and panel members were supportive of its continued use in the REF