Impact in the UK Research Excellence Framework

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The Research Excellence Framework (REF)

• National evaluation of university research
• Conducted every 7 years
• A process of expert review carried out by disciplinary panels (36 Units of Assessment in REF2014, 34 in REF2021)
• REF informs the allocation of funding – around £2 billion per year

• Universities make submissions concerning:
  • Research outputs (academic impacts)
  • Impact of research on society
  • Research environment
Research Excellence Framework - overview

Overall quality

- Outputs
  - FTE x 2.5 = number of outputs required
  - 60%

- Impact
  - Impact case studies
  - 25%

- Environment
  - Environment data and template
  - 15%
Key facts

157 number of UK universities whose research was assessed

1,878 submissions including:
- 76,132 academic staff
- 185,594 research outputs
- 6,781 impact case studies

34 expert sub-panels reviewed the submissions

4 main panels overseeing including:
- 900 academic members
- 220 research users

The overall quality of submissions was judged, on average to be:
- 41% world-leading
- 43% internationally excellent
- 14% recognised internationally
- 2% recognised nationally
Impact case studies

“an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia”

- 5-page structured narrative
- links to ‘underpinning research’ (20 year time window)
- evidence and corroboration
- assessment by academics and research users
- criteria of ‘reach’ and ‘significance’
Impact case study structure

- Summary of impact
- Underpinning research
- References to the research
- Details of the impact
- Sources to corroborate impact
- Metadata
Impact case studies as a research resource

- 6,637 case studies
- All disciplines, almost all universities
- Underpinning research (36,244 with DOIs)
- Search, download, api
- Impact 2008-2013; research 1993-2013

http://impact.ref.ac.uk
Impact case studies as a research resource

- 6,361 case studies
- All disciplines, almost all universities
- Underpinning research (xx,xxx with DOIs)
- Search, download, api
- Impact 2014-2020; research 2000-2020

https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact
Impact categories

- Cultural
- Economic
- Environmental
- Health
- Legal
- Political
- Societal
- Technological
Impact categories – topic modelling

Societal impact takes place over both long and short timescales

“The most positive aspect of preparing for REF 2014 was to illuminate the vast array of research impact which [the university] may not otherwise have realised it had.”

University, quoted in RAND Europe Evaluation report

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

“Evidence was the most difficult element of creating the [impact case study] document and as a result, you ended up thinking more about the evidence rather than the impact. The question was, can I evidence this?”

University, quoted in RAND Europe Evaluation report

The challenges of case studies

• Difficult to aggregate

• Selection biases/focus on exceptional cases

• Promote linear views of research use

• Attribution vs contribution