

## **Statement on the proposal to include impact assessment within the Research Excellence Framework**

### **Campaign for Science & Engineering**

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Science, engineering and mathematics research contribute significantly to the prosperity of the nation. It is extremely important to demonstrate the wide impacts that public investment in the research base has upon society. Interventions to increase the impact of the research base need to be evidence-based. CaSE produced a report on *Impacts of Investment in the Science and Engineering Research Base* which examined the government's economic impact agenda.

Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs) have proposed assessing the impact of research through the Research Excellence Framework. Assessing the impact of research in any meaningful way is an extremely difficult process because there are many pathways to impact. In addition, successful uptake of research outputs requires many conditions to be met that can be outside of the influence of the researcher. It is important that impact assessment within the Research Excellence Framework recognises its limitations.

The stated reason for assessing the impact of research within the REF is to reward university departments that demonstrate that they deliver impact from the research that they perform. The REF should reward constructive engagement with potential beneficiaries of research rather than focussing too closely on actual impact of research. This will ensure that positive processes are put in place, while recognising the limitations in trying to make clear links between research and its impact. The objective of impact within the REF should be to foster knowledge exchange.

It is welcome that a broad definition of impact is used. When developing the impact criteria, expert panels should be able to assess impact activities and actual impact in a way that is appropriate to their unit of assessment given that the process by which research has impact will vary across disciplines.

The impact statement is a fairly straightforward means of stating the extent to which a department supports and facilitates engagement with potential beneficiaries of its research. It is important that expert panels can recognise potential beneficiaries and engagement activities in broad terms that are relevant to their unit of assessment. The prime means of assessing impact should be through the impact statement, and the case studies should be used as evidence to inform the robustness of the statement.

Case studies are one way in which the impact of research can be demonstrated. It has advantages in that it is a retrospective assessment. However, case studies are not a robust means of assessing impact due to inherent limitations and selection bias. Flexibility should be given to departments in determining how they select their case studies in terms of when the research was conducted. What should be assessed is how the department added value to research during the assessment cycle so that it had an appropriate impact.

Consideration needs to be given to monitoring how including impact within the REF would affect the behaviour of researchers in determining what research to conduct and how they engage with user communities. One of the potential benefits of assessing impact within the REF could be the spreading of knowledge in how to improve and potentially speed up the impact of research in different fields.

There are still many unanswered questions about impact assessment as it is currently defined within the REF. Whatever form research assessment of impact takes it needs to be shown to be feasible and credible. If it is not, then impact should not be included within the REF. If it is, then there should be an iterative process to ensure that the criteria and the process of assessment are able to develop over time. The weighting given to impact should be lower than it is currently set (25%) until it has gone through one assessment cycle and has proven to be an appropriate means of research assessment.

HEFCs and universities need to also monitor the burden of assessing impact and ensure that it does not exceed the gain from having the information.

One of the key indicators of impact is income generated by research users, including business, government departments and research charities. Consideration should be given to how full economic costing affects universities decisions to generate income from research users.

Impact assessment within the REF should not be extrapolated to compare the value of disciplines as that is not its objective. The government should develop the evidence base to inform research funding decisions through a directed research programme funded by the Treasury and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills on the science of science policy.