REF Consultation response form

Respondent's details

Are you responding: (Delete one)	On behalf of an organisation
Name of responding organisation/individual	National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement
Type of organisation (Delete those that are not applicable)	Coordinating centre for higher education public engagement, funded by RCUK, UK HE Funding Councils, and the Wellcome Trust
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Consultation questions

Consultation question 1: Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF? If not, explain why.

- We strongly agree with the introduction of an impact assessment component to the REF framework. We believe that public engagement can help increase the societal impact of research and would therefore recommend its addition within Impact.

- We strongly agree with the inclusion of engagement, and particularly public engagement, as a major element within the environment category.

- We are committed to the definition of research provided: 'a process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared'. The words "effectively shared" are crucial and should not be lost.

- We believe that the inclusion of public engagement in the Research Excellence Framework will incentivise UOAs to embed public engagement as an important activity alongside research and teaching.

Consultation question 3: What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing impact? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

Comments are especially welcomed on the following:

- how we propose to address the key challenges of time lags and attribution

- the type of evidence to be submitted, in the form of case studies and an impact statement supported by indicators (including comments on the initial template for case studies and menu of indicators at Annex D)

- the criteria for assessing impact and the definition of levels for the impact sub-profile

- the role of research users in assessing impact.

Overview

The REF proposals are to be warmly welcomed for the inclusion of impact and public engagement in the assessment of research excellence. We believe that the proposals will make a major contribution to the embedding of public engagement in HEIs and research institutes. We also support a case study approach to assessment. This will usefully identify good practice in and evidence of impact of public engagement in the HE sector.

However, we have concerns about the approach to assessing impact. It is easy to interpret the proposals as implying that research is a 'magic bullet' that is applied to society to deliver impact, in a linear and one-way fashion. Partly as a result of this, the proposals have been dismissed by some academics as instrumental, as an assault on academic freedom and on the value of 'curiosity driven' research, and an attempt by government to exert undue influence on the direction of research. We are concerned that this backlash may undermine the foothold that public engagement has established in many HEIs and research institutes.

We believe that these criticisms need to be taken seriously.   We are also confident that the proposals can be re-framed in a more productive way, which is more likely to win the support of the sector, and which will provide a more workable way of ensuring that the social and economic impact of research is increased.

There are five key aspects to this:

- Re-framing the relationship between research and society using the metaphor of an eco-system or complex network, rather than a production line

- Distinguishing between outputs, outcomes and impacts to help clarify how research activity influences the economy and wider society

- Positioning engagement as the process through which 'outputs' are translated into 'impacts', and consequently re-framing the 'Impact' section as 'Engagement and Impact'.

- Placing greater emphasis on the assessment of these engagement processes, and less on the attempt to measure specific impacts.

- Encouraging researchers to evaluate the 'outcomes' of their research, as intermediate steps towards achieving impact. These are easier to evidence and, combined with a focus on engagement processes and a case study approach, should enable panels to make robust assessments.

In the remainder of this answer, we expand on these suggestions.

Our response has been informed by consultation with a range of staff in the beacons for public engagement and other HEIs, and by the work of the NCCPE's **senior public engagement academics action research group**. The latter group have submitted a separate response.

The role of engagement

We believe that 'engagement' is a crucial process in the generation of impact. It enables research outputs to generate impact through connecting the research to a range of beneficiaries and users, including the public, policy makers, business and enterprise organisations and the voluntary and community sector.   As a crucial bridging process (between outputs and impacts) we believe that the engagement activity itself should be made an important focus for the assessment of research excellence. As a result, one of the key objectives of the REF (to 'to encourage desirable behaviours', 27 f.) is more likely to be achieved.

The diagram below represents this set of potential relationships. Rather than being a 'production line' where the research is completed and then exploited to deliver impact, we understand the process to be more like an ecosystem or network, with range of potential relationships being developed by the researcher(s) during the development and then the exploitation of that research. Our thinking mirrors the wide acceptance that 'knowledge transfer' misrepresents the dynamic nature of interactions between universities and their partners, and the preference for the notion of 'knowledge exchange'.   Within this model, engagement with the general public is one of a range of types of engagement through which researchers can deepen the impact of their work.
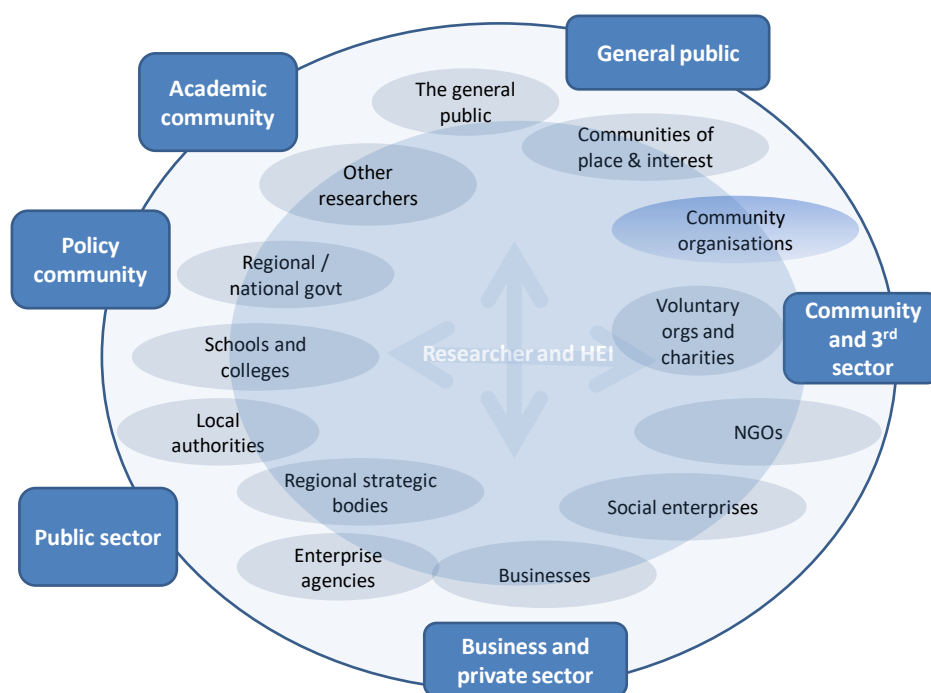
Figure 1: The relationship between researchers and research users

We recommend that:

- The underlying model of how research impacts on society should be re-framed using the metaphor of an eco-system or complex network, rather than a production line;

- Engagement should be fore-grounded in the proposals as the process through which 'outputs' are translated into 'impacts';

- That the 'Impact' section be re-framed as 'Engagement and Impact' to reflect the crucial role that engagement plays in the development and exploitation of research.

- That public engagement is explicitly recognised in the Engagement and Impact section as an important route to achieving impact

Assessing Engagement and Impact

The assessment of impact – and of engagement – is notoriously difficult, and concerns about the robustness of the approach outlined in the REF proposals have been widespread. The Impact Pilots will clearly address some of these concerns.

Drawing on the experiences of the Beacons for Public Engagement and other practitioners inside and outside the HE sector, we would also like to offer the following practical suggestions for how the assessment might be approached.

We strongly support the use of a case study approach to assessment. We have some particular suggestions about how the proposed template and indictors might be developed to allow for a robust assessment to be made, which we spell out below. Specifically, we propose three broad areas of questioning to provide a practical framework for the assessment

1. Can the researcher(s) evidence a strategic approach to their 'Engagement and Impact' activities?

It will be important that the submissions demonstrate that researchers have thought through who they think might benefit from their research, when appropriate have consulted with them, and that they have used this intelligence to develop an appropriate plan to attempt to maximise the potential impact / benefit.

There are a wide range of potential purposes for engagement with different potential beneficiaries, and we've listed a sample below:

Beneficiaries	Potential benefits
Policy makers	• To help improve existing policies, or to inform the development of new policy
The general public	• To develop understanding and appreciation of the research area
	• To proactively address social and ethical concerns, and use

	the intelligence to inform the direction of the research • To draw on expertise of 'lay' experts • To open up new lines of enquiry
Practitioners (eg health, media, industry)	• To reflect upon and help improve professional practice

We should expect that the case studies will provide answers to the following questions, which are useful prompts for the assessment of the strategic focus of the project:

- Did the researcher(s) identify potential benefits and beneficiaries for their research early in the research phase?

- Was their approach informed by appropriate attempts to gather intelligence and insight (eg by analysis of previous or current research activity in a similar area; by desk research; by meeting with potential beneficiaries to inform their work)?

- As a result of the above, did they develop an appropriate strategy to maximise the benefit to the potential beneficiaries?

- Did they monitor these over the lifetime of the project, and – if appropriate – beyond?

2. Did the researcher(s) implement an effective engagement and impact plan?

There is a range of practical ways in which researchers can then realise their strategy to maximise the impact of their work with potential beneficiaries. Given that impact itself is so hard to measure, we believe that a useful proxy is to look at the attempts that have been made by the research team to engage with appropriate beneficiaries: effectively, 'process indicators'.

It would be appropriate to consider:

- Did the researcher(s) initiate engagement activities appropriate to their goals?

- Did they implement these activities in an effective way, and follow them through to maximise their benefit to the participants?

Engagement process	**Exemplar activities**
Maximising opportunities to communicate the activity to interested audiences	Conferences and seminars Publications Interaction with media outlets to communicate research activity Presentations / workshops / hands on events targeting the public
Encouraging	Collaborative research projects

'ownership' of the research by people who are well placed to benefit from the findings	Input to government consultations
	Participation as researcher on advisory/steering boards of cultural & community organisations
	Co-authored outputs
	Input to training / guidance / practice guides
	Participation on public policy / advisory committees
Engaging with beneficiaries to co-produce new knowledge and inform the direction of the research	Joint identification of research questions
	Staff exchanges / secondments
	'Deliberative' processes to capture stakeholder perspectives
	Consultation processes which have impacted on the research
	User and community representation on panels
	Evidence of reflective practises

3. What evidence can they offer of the impact that their research has achieved?

The proposals suggest that a menu of 'common indicators' might be used by researchers to evidence the impact of their work. We have reservations about this approach, which we outline below. We then describe an approach which we believe to be more likely to be successful.

Indicators of impact

Any set of pre-determined indicators will limit the capacity of the REF to meaningfully assess the variety or quality of impacts. The consultation paper clearly asserts that research teams and stakeholders in research will be in a much better position to determine what the impact of research has been, and that "we do not envisage specifying or defining indicators in detail" (Appendix D, paragraph 10). We were therefore surprised by the menu of indicators provided in the same annex which seems to attempt such a specification. We feel strongly that detailed indicators will be unhelpful.

(a) it is impossible to have an exhaustive list of indicators - there will always be many more indicators that denote research quality;

(b) indicators cannot capture the impact of a great deal of research; and

(c) it must be recognised there is not a linear relationship between much research and impact[1].

We do agree that having broad categories ('Types of impact') to frame indicators is likely to be helpful, but some of the impact categories suggested are problematic. For example: attracting R&D is not an impact but an outcome from research (see below for an elaboration of this point). The category itself should also be expanded to include NGOs and public sector investment, alongside the delivery of highly skilled people.

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[1] For further elaboration on the relationship between research and impact, see: [references here!], e.g. What works? Evidence-based policy and practice in public services . Huw T.O. Davies, Sandra M. Nutley, Peter C. Smith

Outputs, outcomes and impacts

We believe that It would be helpful to distinguish between outputs, outcomes and impacts. This is established practice in evaluation. We would define outputs as the products of research, outcomes as the changes that happen as a result of research (these could be organisational, behavioural, attitudinal, technological, cultural etc), and impacts are the effects that these changes have on society, economy and the environment. These distinctions are widely recognised and supported in the literature[2]. We illustrate the distinction through the following example:

Example:

An action research project was commissioned by the British Red Cross focusing on the issue of vulnerability. At the heart of the research was a concern that volunteers in organisations like the Red Cross were not effectively reaching the most vulnerable populations. The project involved interviews and action research groups exploring their understanding of vulnerability and how vulnerability was engaged with by the British Red Cross. Data was streamed into large events where it was collectively analysed by multiple stakeholders.

In this project the **Outputs** were the action research meetings, the large events and the records of those meetings; as well as the pilot reports, the final research report, articles generated as a result of the work and so on. Arguably another important output was the fact that over 500 people were directly engaged in the action research process

Outcomes included
  1) a change in the discourse about vulnerability within the British Red Cross (BRC) - such that staff and volunteers began to think much more of the extent to which vulnerable *individuals* could cope rather than the vulnerability of the *group* that they belonged to.

  2) a series of national pilot projects, which generated learning and from this changed specific practices

  3) major changes in the BRC's UK service strategy flowing as a direct result of this work

  4) significant changes in the way in which volunteers were recruited

To assess **impacts** in this example, we would need to know that over time the work of the British Red Cross changed significantly, and – most importantly that the changes positively impacted on the intended **audience** or beneficiaries – AND that this link could be directly linked to the outcomes listed above. This issue of attribution is rarely straightforward and never linear. This example suggests that there are relatively straightforward ways to assess outcomes, but it very difficult assess impacts, given the constraints of time lags and attribution (as pointed out in paragraph 62). To assess impacts would require a parallel evaluative research project over a ten year period, and given the non-linear relationship between research and impact this would need to be a sophisticated and time-consuming piece of evaluation.

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[2] See OECD DAC 'Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation', available at: http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/29/21/2754804.pdf

It is also important to note that in practice research may produce outcomes, but the impacts are mediated through other stakeholders (often not academic).

Case studies: revising the template

In the light of the above, we would recommend that the case study template might be usefully redesigned to reflect the logic of the assessment more closely. The following prompts

- Who were identified as the key beneficiaries (and why were they chosen)?
- What processes were put in place to engage with them?
- How did you evaluate the process?
- What were the outputs and outcomes of that engagement?
- What indication is there of the long term impact of the research?

Case study template (revised)
1. Title of case study.

2. Explain how the unit's research and engagement activity was undertaken to maximise the impact of the research (maximum 500 words), including:
  • An outline of what the underpinning research was, when this was undertaken and by whom (references should be provided in section 4)
  • Who were identified as the key beneficiaries (and why were they chosen)?
  • What processes were put in place to engage with them?
  • How did you evaluate the process?

3. Describe and provide evidence of the specific outputs, outcomes and impacts (maximum 500 words), including:
  • What were the outputs and outcomes of that engagement?
  • What indication is there of the long term impact of the research?

4. Provide references to:
 	
  • key research outputs that underpin the engagement and impact
 	
  • external reports or documents, or contact details of a user, that could corroborate the impact or the unit's contribution (as described in sections 2 and 3).

Case studies: proportionality with outputs

We find the proposal for limiting the number of case studies to 1 per 5-10 members of staff restricting. Given that 25% of the assessment relates to impact, we would expect a higher number of case studies. If this were to be proportional to the number of outputs being submitted, one would expect roughly 1/3 of the number of case studies as outputs.

User representation on panels

Finally, we also have concerns about how research users will participate on panels. A central issue with involving research users on panels is the relative difference in power, capacity, and influence that will exist amongst research users on panels and senior academics and other panel members. This may be less significant if the designated 'research user' is a senior government civil servant or a NGO chief executive, but if they are community activists or users of mental health services, these can easily become critical issues. In this arrangement, it would be important to ensure that the independent voice(s) of all panel members were supported; these may well require special process supports.

Furthermore, the selection of user panel members is also problematic as it is unlikely that many people can afford the time commitment to analyse adequately the large amounts of material under review. Those that can make themselves available are not necessarily likely to be representative in any sense of the research user communities.

Further development work is clearly essential in this area, building on the lessons learned from the RAE, and focusing on interventions such as the training of chairs and secretariat, use of sub-panels just made up of users, support for users etc.

Consultation question 4: Do you have any comments on the proposed approach to assessing research environment?

We strongly endorse the inclusion of 'Engagement' within the Environment section, and the selection of activities detailed under this heading.

In addition, we would encourage Units of Assessment and Submitting Institutions to provide evidence of how they are embedding support for engagement in their professional culture. Submission of departmental and institutional strategies should be encouraged, to provide an overview of their approach. The NCCPE has developed a framework to support institutions in developing such strategies, and has identified the following six key areas as critical ones to address in such strategies.

MISSION	Create a shared understanding of the purpose, value, meaning and role of public engagement to staff and students and embed this in your strategy and mission, with leaders actively promoting this commitment.
REWARD	Recognise and reward staff involvement within recruitment, career promotion, professional development and training, workload plans and performance reviews.
SUPPORT	Co-ordinate the delivery to maximise efficiency, target support, improve quality, foster innovation, join up thinking and monitor involvement and impact.
STUDENTS	Proactively include and involve students in shaping the mission and in the delivery of the strategy.

PUBLIC	Involve the public in the governance of the institution and through regular community dialogue and activity.
CELEBRATE	Communicate widely to encourage and share effective practice and to celebrate success, within the institution and the wider world.

In assessing 'excellent' engagement, we would be looking for evidence of the following environmental factors:

- Evidence that the **research agenda is constructed through engagement** with publics, rather than purely the individual interests of academic staff.

- Evidence that research teams have **built in processes for reflection** on their practice. This will not only indicate a higher quality of research design, but will strengthen training and generic skills within research teams.

- Evidence that <u>long-standing</u> **relationships with "stakeholders, users, clients"** are being built, maintained and developed. Research communities need to show demonstrable and effective partnerships. This issue of investing in long standing relationships is important. Firstly, because a relationship maintained suggests long-term mutual benefit. Secondly, it suggests that the impact is sustainable, and thirdly it avoids the possibility that UoA's build short tokenistic relationships just for the purpose of the REF. More generally there is currently no consideration of the role and responsibility of the research community towards its local environment and this should be explicitly sought.

Consultation question 5: Do you agree with our proposals for combining and weighting the output, impact and environment sub-profiles? If not please propose an alternative and explain why this is preferable.

We believe that impact should be adequately rewarded in the REF. We accept that the opposition to the impact proposals, and the untried methodology (except in a relatively small pilot) could make the proposed weighting difficult to implement at this point.

We would accept that the Impact weighting might be reduced to 20%, but would argue that the Environment weighting should be increased to 20%. A well-founded environment and credible future strategy for sustaining the unit (one of the only forward looking parts of the assessment) are essential to support the high quality research that will sustain the health of the UK research base. At the same time, the changes in behaviour and approach that the impact proposals will demand require significant investment in training, development and support infrastructure. This increase would support such an investment

Consultation question 8: Do you have any suggested additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies? (If suggesting additional bodies, please provide their names and addresses and indicate how they are qualified to make nominations.)

Given our extensive network of staff with expertise in public engagement and its assessment, we would propose the NCCPE as a nominating body.

Consultation question 12: Do you have any comments about the proposed timetable?

Given that the Impact pilots do not report back until autumn 2010, and that this is an area of particular concern to the sector, the timetable appears unworkable as it stands. We recommend a delay, to allow time for the findings from the Impact Pilots to be properly integrated into the new framework and to allow time for the panels to get to grips with the new approach.