
Summary

- We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Higher Education Funding Council for England consultation on the potential benefits and challenges of internationalising the Research Excellence Framework. Our response to each question has been informed by the expertise of our Fellows and we would be pleased to provide further comments if required.
- The Academy supports further developing the international agenda of the Research Excellence Framework, to identify a core set of interested parties and options for implementation which will enhance the international research agenda.
- This process should reflect on the current UK process, which some of our Fellows believe carried a high cost burden. Demonstrating value for money will support international uptake.
- The Academy recognises potential benefits from increased international participation, but notes key challenges which would need to be fully addressed to support successful implementation.
- International benchmarking will enhance the UK's global reputation for research, particularly within world-class sectors such as the life sciences.
- By establishing a collaborative framework for interested parties, the UK will be well-placed to shape the international research assessment agenda going forward.
- It would need to be demonstrated that the current level of rigour could endure a scaling-up process, and that consensus was feasible around what constitutes 'valuable' research.
- While the UK system of assessment provides a strategic framework, it is likely to need flexibility and adjustment for individual countries.

Introduction

The Academy of Medical Sciences promotes advances in medical science and campaigns to ensure that these are translated into healthcare benefits for society. Our elected Fellowship includes the UK's foremost experts drawn from a broad and diverse range of research areas, from basic research, through clinical application, to healthcare delivery.

Key potential benefits of expanding the REF internationally

International benchmarking could enhance the profile of UK centres of excellence by allowing direct comparisons at a global level and will facilitate the development of research assessment in other countries.

Lessons may be learned from assessment frameworks operating abroad, such as Excellence in Research for Australia. The recent, and successful, process in Hong Kong was based on the 2008 UK RAE, though this was facilitated by historical similarities between the two academic systems.

Frameworks should foster inclusivity and avoid marginalising partners. In line with Professor Eastwood's original proposal¹, we see benefits in identifying local drivers of demand, and establishing a collaborative community to guide the development of the process and its outputs.

¹ Further background information on an international REF, HEFCE, October 2014

International representation on recent REF panels supports credibility abroad, and indications suggest that this first-hand experience of the process has created favourable sentiment.

There is increasing interest from the community in 'Science 2.0', which values open-research frameworks, collaboration and shared metrics. Such principles would be well-represented in a processes redesigned to operate at an international level, and may be welcomed by the community.

Key potential challenges to expanding the REF internationally

The validity of any scaled-up process would rest on the foundation that international research environments are comparable, a point of concern for some of our Fellows. Further examination of the national differences is advisable, to inform a design which is both efficient and meaningful.

It would need to be demonstrated that expanding the REF would not dilute the current level of rigour and scrutiny. Unified assessment criteria would require a consensus among culturally-diverse partners on what constitutes valuable research, a priority topic for early panel discussions.

The costs of the exercise remain unclear, and are a matter of concern for some of our Fellows. It would need to be clearly demonstrated, both domestically and externally, that a shared process would offer value for money and deliver outputs which were useful to all parties involved.

Would you support further work to explore the issues in more depth?

Further investigation is warranted but should begin at the broadest possible level. The assessment process must be evaluated for its relevance in an evolving research landscape, and the outputs must be shown to align with the changing demands of stakeholders.

Our Fellows believe that collaborative outputs are undervalued by current assessment metrics, and proposed models should strive to capture collaboration and fairly represent those with divided responsibilities (e.g. clinical researchers). The Academy is preparing a report on Team science², the outcome of which may be helpful to HEFCE.

The retrospective nature of the current REF process makes the linking of assessment outputs to funding decisions challenging. International benchmarking would need to demonstrate value to decision makers, an aspect of the debate which may be supported by an improved understanding of how league tables currently influence decisions within the sector and across Government.

This response was prepared by Ben Bleasdale (Policy Officer) and informed by the Academy's Fellows. For further information, please contact: ben.bleasdale@acmedsci.ac.uk; +44(0)20 3176 2158.

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² <http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/team-science/>

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