

REF consultation 2017: NCCPE response

This document contains the full NCCPE response to the REF consultation. It draws upon:

- the NCCPE's [review of public engagement](#) in REF 2014
- the NCCPE's [briefing paper](#) about public engagement and the REF

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QUESTION 1: Do you have any comments on the proposal to maintain an overall continuity of approach with ref 2014, as outlined in paragraphs 10 and 23?

It is an excellent idea to maintain continuity of approach with REF 2014, for the reasons outlined in the consultation document. We are broadly supportive of the proposals outlined in the consultation, and welcome the opportunity it has provided to offer clearer guidance about public engagement in particular. However, we would have liked to see a more ambitious approach in three areas:

- **INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF EXTERNAL 'STAKEHOLDERS' IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING REF 2021.** The REF is currently framed as a process managed by and for the HE sector, with some limited involvement of 'research users'. We argue for a more ambitious framing of the next REF, as a more open conversation with wider society about the value of research. We identify two areas where a more open approach should be explored:
 - Opening up **the development of impact criteria** to greater external input, through a more active approach to consultation and engagement (Q.15)
 - Reviewing the **process of recruitment** of panel members, to address ambiguity in the roles of 'research users' as representative or otherwise of their communities (Q.3A)
- **BROADENING THE DEFINITION OF IMPACT AND UNDERPINNING RESEARCH.** It is helpful to frame the REF as assessing excellent **research** (judged by the quality of the research outputs) and excellent **societal engagement** (judged by the reach and significance of the impact achieved, and the rigour of the engagement undertaken).
 - We recommend that the assessment of the 'rigour' of the engagement undertaken be added to the assessment of the 'reach and significance' (Q.22)
 - We recommend that the definitions of 'underpinning research' and 'impact' are developed, to encourage more engagement earlier in the research cycle and to better recognise the value that engagement brings to the research (Q.20 and 29)
- **DRAWING MORE PURPOSEFULLY ON THE EXTENSIVE LITERATURE ABOUT ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT TO DEVELOP A MORE ROBUST AND CRITICAL APPROACH TO IMPACT IN REF 2021.** There is a wealth of theoretical and practical literature exploring the challenges of impact assessment and evaluation, both within the HE sector and beyond. We would like to see:

- A concerted effort to increase the sophistication of our **collective understanding** of knowledge exchange, engagement and impact, and of how impact can be evidenced
- Robust debate and professional development to encourage an intelligent, reflective and critical approach to impact, engagement and evaluation, so that the process doesn't stagnate into a 'box ticking' exercise
- Efforts being made to better align the HE REF impact criteria with outcome frameworks being used in other sectors (for instance the Generic Learning Outcomes, used in the museums and library sectors) (Q.32)

QUESTION 3A: Do you agree that the submissions guidance and panel criteria should be developed simultaneously?

We recommend a different approach to the recruitment of panels and the development of criteria to that outlined in the consultation. There would be significant benefits realised by treating separately the processes of setting criteria and that of recruiting panel members.

Our rationale is that the current approach attempts to conflate two very different objectives:

- To secure 'common purpose' with key stakeholders and ensure the system reflects their interests / needs
- To invest in an effective and professional process of assessment which has the confidence of key stakeholders and which addresses equality and diversity aspirations.

This is reflected in some confusion in the current proposals:

- The term 'representativeness' is applied both to the extent to which the panels meet expectations around diversity and equalities; and the extent to which their members represent professional interests in the process
- When it comes to the latter, the guidance seems to be saying 'we want to identify representative organisations, and invite them to nominate people; we will then recruit people but we won't expect them to act as representatives'.

Separating and clarifying the objectives of the development of criteria and recruitment of panels would enable the two processes to be run in parallel but with distinct purposes:

Purpose 1: Setting criteria

- Ensuring the criteria describe subject and user communities' interests and values, and draw on expertise from outside the HE sector: achieved by running a more open and transparent process of consultation on the criteria and guidance

Purpose 2: Selecting panellists

- Ensuring members have the necessary expertise to assess the anticipated submissions; and that panel recruitment addresses equality and diversity: achieved by reviewing the types of expertise and training required and by running a more open and transparent recruitment process and training programme

CONSULTATION ON CRITERIA

We believe that there would be great value in running a light touch consultation on the panel criteria in the latter part of 2017. Key organisations could be identified and invited to contribute feedback on the existing criteria and to offer suggestions for how these might be enhanced and improved, including expectations of the evidence of impact.

RECRUITMENT PROCESS

We recommend that the panel recruitment process could be significantly improved by the following changes:

- A synthesis of the lessons learned from REF 2014 to identify the key knowledge, skills and characteristics of effective panel members
- Using the above to provide an explicit 'map' of the types of expertise required generically by all panels; by the 4 main panels; and the sub-panels
- The creation of role profiles which detail the critical areas of expertise (e.g. to include assessing engagement with the public). We would suggest that there is great value in the idea suggested in the consultation of identifying 'champion' roles in each panel, focused on specific areas of impact assessment such as interdisciplinarity and Public Engagement. These 'champions' could be actively networked across the 4 main panels to ensure cross fertilisation of expertise and consistency of approach
- Running an open recruitment process to select the necessary expertise.

QUESTION 3B: Do you support the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year?

If our suggestion of approaching the recruitment of panel members and the development of criteria as separate processes is accepted, then the later appointment of sub panel members makes good sense.

However, if as is more likely the two processes continue to be run in parallel, we would have reservations about leaving the recruitment of sub panel members until later in the process. The reason for this is:

- The members of the sub-panels will provide critical insight and intelligence to inform the development of the panel criteria. In the case of impact criteria, they will significantly increase the diversity of sectors and types of expertise that can contribute to the criteria-setting process
- Were they not to be involved, the process would be overseen by a very small number of people and significantly limit the extent to which the REF has actively engaged with communities of interest inside and outside the sector

QUESTION 4: Do you agree with the proposed measures outlined at paragraph 35 for improving representativeness on the panels?

As outlined above, the way representativeness is discussed in the consultation is confusing. The term is used to explore two different things:

- How the recruitment process can effectively address equality and diversity
- How the process can ensure that different professional interests are effectively represented

We agree with the suggested approach to equality and diversity, which represents good practice.

However, we have concerns about the rigour of the approach suggested to ensuring the second point: the way in which the panels can best represent wider professional and stakeholder interests. We have talked to a number of the organisations who were cited in the REF as collaborators or research users, or who represent significant stakeholders in the next REF. We were struck by how low the general awareness was of the REF. It was also clear that this consultation was extremely challenging for anyone working outside the HE sector to complete. The questions and framing assume an in depth knowledge of the process run in 2014, and that respondents work inside the university sector. There was significant enthusiasm for a light touch consultation process to inform the development of the new guidance and criteria. This might be organised by Main Panel area, involving the types of

organisations who featured in impact case studies in 2014. Running open events with targeted invitations for each main panel area could elicit a significant amount of useful intelligence to inform the guidance and criteria, and also serve to raise awareness of the REF with key stakeholders.

QUESTION 6: Please comment on any additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies

This is a very extensive list. We have not conducted a systematic assessment of the coverage, but there are some notable organisations missing which suggests that a more in depth review would be valuable. Examples include

- The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) which receives a number of mentions in submitted case studies, and which distributed over £1billion to projects with a social mission in 2014-15;
- Locality: the national network of community organisations
- Involve (the participation organisation, not INVOLVE who support patient involvement in health who are named): Involve have internationally recognised expertise in citizen participation

We suggest that it would be helpful to consider whether the framing of these as ‘nominating bodies’ might be more helpfully expressed as ‘stake-holding bodies’ and a more strategic approach taken to how they might be actively engaged in the REF process, for instance through the consultation and engagement process outlined in our response to question 4.

QUESTION 15: What are your comments on better supporting collaboration between academia and organisations beyond higher education in REF 2021?

We would like to see the environment template requiring HEIs to provide evidence of effective collaboration (Q.35). Here, we recommend several ‘systemic’ approaches which funders might take to better support such collaboration.

ENGAGING MORE SYSTEMATICALLY WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO BETTER SECURE THEIR ‘BUY IN’, SUPPORT AND EXPERTISE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REF

We would recommend

- Implementing our suggestions regarding consultation around criteria and panel expertise made in response to Q 3A and 4 – involving key stakeholders in that process
- Building on the recommendations in the Dowling review, taking steps to reduce the complexity of the research and innovation system (we make suggestions for how this might be done in our response to Q.21 (aligning definitions))

MAKING IT EASIER FOR THOSE FROM OUTSIDE ACADEMIA TO QUICKLY ESTABLISH THEMSELVES WITHIN UNIVERSITIES AND TO BE SUBMITTED FOR THE REF, by for instance:

- Reducing output thresholds (as recommended in the Dowling review);
- Broadening the definition of underpinning research to (for instance) recognise work to nurture and sustain research networks;

ENCOURAGING UNIVERSITIES TO INVEST IN STRATEGIC COLLABORATIONS OR FORUMS, BUILDING ON EXAMPLES OF EXISTING PROGRAMMES

Finding systematic ways to encourage ‘upstream’ engagement between HE and wider society to shape and refine research agendas should be a key ambition of REF 2021. A number of examples exist including

- [The Museum-University Partnership Initiative](#), funded by ACE and coordinated by the NCCPE, which helps smaller museums to access university researchers to build collaborative projects

- Strategic Research Groups (SRGs) focusing on transforming the scale and scope of ‘learning in natural environments’ initiated by Natural England and Historic England, bringing together over 20 HEIs, each member representing other relevant specialist research networks. These groups have delivered a significant number of high quality research and evidence outputs, which are now being actively used to shape policy and practice: *“Experience with the SRGs shows that is demand from HEIs to work in a more collaborative and strategic way. There is no funding mechanism or incentive to support HEIs to work in this way, so we rely on their good will and the value they place on this approach. Going forward we would welcome ways to support and encourage collaboration over shared strategic research agendas.* (SRG Development Officer, Dr Anne Hunt)

The guidance should incentivise the investment of time and resources into such networks.

BUILDING ON THE EXISTING LITERATURE AND KNOWLEDGE BASE ABOUT COLLABORATION, TO INFORM THE APPROACH TO ASSESSING IMPACT

There has been significant investment in reviews of university collaboration. Conducting a quick synthesis of the key findings and recommendations from these reviews would accelerate progress and consolidate effective practice by providing a set of underpinning principles and a rationale for the approach embodied in the REF . Examples of such reviews include:

- [The Dowling Review of Business-University Collaborations](#) (BEIS)
- [InterAction How can academics and the third sector work together to influence policy and practice?](#) (Carnegie)
- [Towards a Knowledge Base for University-Public Engagement: sharing knowledge, building insight and taking action](#) (NCCPE)
- [The Art of Partnering](#) (KCL)

QUESTION 20: What comments do you have on the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of impact?

We welcome the invitation to offer a ‘broader and deeper’ definition of impact. REF 2014 worked on the assumption that ‘impact’ could be assessed independently of the process of engagement. A more pragmatic approach would acknowledge that the PROCESS of engagement provides important additional evidence to help judge the significance and credibility of the claimed impacts. This case was convincingly argued by the ESRC, whose [‘taking stock’ work](#) (2009) identified various factors that underpin effective approaches to impact (including ‘*well-planned user-engagement and knowledge exchange strategies*’). They argue that these factors ‘*serve as proxy indicators of impact*’.

A better framing is that the REF is not assessing ‘social impacts’ as stand-alone effects, but as part of a process of engagement between researchers and society. Robust criteria, derived from research, can be identified to describe rigorous engagement practice, which could form part of the guidance (see Q.23). In addition, we recommend:

CLARIFYING THE TYPES OF IMPACT THAT COUNT

The sector reported ambiguity in the 2014 guidance about whether impacts arising from public engagement could or should be submitted. This will require clearer guidance and modified criteria (see q.23)

THE FACT THAT THERE ARE VERY DIFFERENT TYPES OF SOCIETAL IMPACTS THAT CAN ARISE FROM RESEARCH, BUT ALL MATTER

A crude representation of the varieties of impact that can be described would differentiate between:

- Economic and societal impact

- Quantitative and qualitative measures of impact

It is important that the guidance emphasises that both economic and societal impact are equally valued as long as the evidence of their reach, significance and rigour is credible and convincing. Both quantitative and qualitative measures of impact are required, but that the balance between these will depend on the nature of the impact being claimed and how it can be realistically evidenced.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT THE TERM ‘IMPACT’ IMPLIES LINEAR CAUSE AND EFFECT – BUT IN REALITY, THE PROCESS IS OFTEN MORE SUBTLE, POSING CHALLENGES FOR ASSESSMENT

Not all impacts are ‘neat’, direct and linear examples of cause and effect. Often they are more subtle and involve a ‘contribution’ to a change, rather than being the sole cause of it. These impacts still matter. This should be explicitly acknowledged.

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT SOME TYPES OF IMPACT ARE HARDER TO EVIDENCE THAN OTHERS, AND PROVIDING GUIDANCE ABOUT WHAT IS ‘GOOD ENOUGH’ EVIDENCE

Given the above, the guidance should provide greater clarity about how those more indirect and nuanced types of effect can be best described, and acknowledge that the assessment of impact is a process of ‘judgement’ rather than solely ‘measurement’.

BROADENING THE DEFINITION OF UNDERPINNING RESEARCH

The framing of research ‘underpinning’ impact should also be challenged. Some of the impact may have happened **before** the research began, which codified the learning, and then provided a wider reach or depth to the impact being generated. It would be better to talk about the ‘association’ between research and impact, rather than assuming that research always ‘underpins’ impact, and to acknowledge the potentially powerful contribution of engagement to the quality of the research.

QUESTION 21: Do you agree with the proposal for the funding bodies and Research Councils UK to align their definitions of academic and wider impact? If yes, what comments do you have on the proposed definitions?

Yes

The Dowling Review of Business-University Research Collaboration pointed to the need for a simpler, more coherent policy framework for innovation: *‘Innovation is a complex, non-linear process, so the complexity of the UK’s innovation ecosystem is not surprising and may be to a degree inevitable. However, the complexity of the policy support mechanisms for research and innovation poses a barrier to business engagement in collaborative activities []. The over-arching recommendation of this review is therefore that government should seek to reduce complexity wherever possible’.*

We identify two areas below, where the guidance could be simpler and more coherent

FRAMING IMPACT AS THE RESULT OF SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT

Stepping back, there are a host of different funding streams and policies across the UK which seek to encourage pathways to social and economic impact from research and innovation, resulting in a muddle of different definitions and frameworks. We recommend a simpler framing of how the REF seeks to assess:

- **Excellent research** – recognised through significant advances in understanding, methods, theory, application and research practice, across and within disciplines
- **Excellent societal engagement** – recognised through social and economic impact (an effect on, change to or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, education, the environment, or quality of life) and through significant advances in KE and PE practice.

Why the change?

- We propose ‘excellent research’ rather than ‘academic impacts’ to clarify the focus of the REF on assessing **research quality**
- ‘Excellent societal engagement’ rather than ‘wider impacts’ to clarify the contribution of research to the overarching goal of realising social and economic impact, and to highlight that the process (‘engagement’) as well as the outcomes (‘impact’) is significant. Impacts that arise without any engagement activity by the researcher (which happens occasionally) would still be captured by this framing
- The definition of social and economic impact modified to include ‘education’ to align better with the definition in HEIF and to clarify the intersection between REF and TEF
- The inclusion of ‘significant advances in KE and PE practice’ to reflect the value of methodological innovation in engagement (just as it is valued for research)

DEFINING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Underneath this top level definition, we would also recommend a unified description of public engagement with research, clarifying the expectations of REF, HEFCE, Research Council and other funders such as Wellcome. There remains significant ambiguity. For example:

From [Research Councils UK](#): “The public includes individuals, groups, young people and their families who do not currently have a formal relationship with a HEI through teaching, research or knowledge transfer, but who may have an interest in these activities or upon whom the research or its application could impact.”

While [HEFCE's](#) Knowledge Exchange Funding Stream (HEIF) notes that “The funding provides incentives for HEIs to work with businesses, public and third sector organisations, community bodies and the wider public”.

Hence the ambiguity, where RCUK list public engagement as not being part of Knowledge Transfer/ Exchange, while HEFCE include it under its KE funding ‘umbrella’.

QUESTION 22: what comments do you have on the criteria of reach and significance?

There is scope to improve the clarity of guidance about ‘reach and significance’. The 2014 guidance saw significant differences in how the four main panels interpreted the terms. The evaluation of the REF revealed how the sector struggled to interpret the guidance.

What is helpful about the terms is that they do acknowledge some of the complexities with judging impact, for instance:

- How do you weigh up ‘breadth’ (reach) against ‘depth’ (significance)?
- How can the ‘meaning’ (significance) of the impact be conveyed – as well as the ‘numbers’ (reach)?

They provided a useful way to balance large scale reach but relatively shallow participation against deep and sustained engagement from a smaller number of people: the guidance should be explicit that both examples are valuable.

While ‘reach and significance’ help to weigh up the value of the impacts being claimed, we would argue that a third dimension should be added to explain how the panels will make their judgements: an assessment of ‘rigour’ to acknowledge that assessing the PROCESS of engagement provides vital evidence to inform judgements of the credibility of the claimed impacts. Anecdotally, panellists all described how helpful it was when case studies ‘showed their working’, providing clear and logical ‘links in the chain’ in their account of what they did to achieve impact. The ESRC’s work to take stock of impact assessment, referred to in our response to Q.20 makes a robust case that the process of engagement can act as a ‘proxy’ indicator of impact.

Making the assessment of rigour an explicit (rather than implicit) part of the REF framework will have a number of positive benefits, including:

- Increasing the confidence of Units of Assessment in submitting a wider range of evidence to demonstrate research impact.
- Improving the planning for pathways to impact, and therefore the quality of research impacts across the sector.

Building on the ESRC Taking Stock work, it would be possible to define a set of robust criteria to underpin assessment of rigour. This identified the following key factors *'that are vital for impact generation'*, which provide a useful starting point, which would need to be developed to ensure they are relevant to all the discipline areas being assessed:

- *Established relationships and networks with user communities*
- *Involvement of research users at all stages of the research*
- *Well-planned user-engagement and knowledge exchange strategies*
- *Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users*
- *Good infrastructure and management support*
- *Where appropriate, the involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers* ([Taking Stock](#), p.17)

QUESTION 23: What do you think about having further guidance for public engagement impacts and what do you think would be helpful?

Our review of the REF 2014 case studies revealed nearly half of them included mention of engagement with the public. Public engagement (PE) led to impacts on cultural life and public awareness, but also included examples of impacts on health and wellbeing; environment; education; economics and policy. The new guidance should encourage researchers to be ambitious in considering the benefits that can arise.

The case studies featuring PE in 2014:

MAINLY FOCUSED ON AWARENESS RAISING/ DISSEMINATION. Whilst valuable, researchers should be encouraged to submit examples where the engagement is happening earlier in the research cycle, involving consultation and collaboration.

TENDED TO BE WEAKLY EVIDENCED. Our review highlighted various ways in which evidence of PE might be enhanced. Drawing on the ESRC's impact work, we developed a framework that:

- Describes the overarching 'ends' which PE with research can realise (identifying three storylines focused on 'enlightenment', 'social innovation' and 'social action')
- Provides examples of the kinds of outcomes and longer term impacts that can realistically be claimed, and what constitutes 'good enough' evidence

OFTEN LACKED A COMPELLING RATIONALE OR CONVINCING 'LINKS IN THE CHAIN'. Impacts arising from research are often subtle, consisting of a contribution to wider effects in society, which cannot be easily 'measured'. Therefore assessors need to make judgements about the context and process of engagement deployed to realise the impacts. In Q.22, we recommend that assessment criteria are broadened beyond 'reach and significance' to include 'rigour'

OFTEN LACKED PRECISION IN DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC. The better case studies were precise in defining the demographics, motivations and context of the public with whom they were engaging. This should be encouraged.

DEMONSTRATED DIFFERENCES IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINE AREAS. PE was more pervasive in Panel D, but featured significantly across all panels, demonstrating a variety of purposes and methods (e.g. patient involvement; citizen science; outreach; participative arts practice; user-centred design). This diversity should be acknowledged and encouraged.

OFTEN INCLUDED PE AS ONE STRAND IN A BLEND OF KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ACTIVITY. This welcome trend, represents a maturing and deepening understanding of how different forms of external engagement should be planned and supported in a holistic way. Therefore in our response to Q.21, we argue that more should be done to ensure a consistent and coherent framing of the role of PE in funding bodies' guidance.

WERE VALUED AS HIGHLY AS CASE STUDIES FEATURING OTHER ROUTES TO IMPACT. We found no evidence that case studies where PE featured significantly scored less highly. Anecdotally, many universities were nervous that this might happen and chose not to take the risk of submitting case studies featuring PE. The guidance should include a clear statement that PE is as valuable as other routes to impact, and will be assessed accordingly.

Our review indicated there is considerable scope to enhance the ambition and quality of PE activities in the next REF, and includes a variety of frameworks and tools which support researchers to quickly develop their practice in this area. It can be accessed here:

https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/reviewing_pe_in_ref_2014_final.pdf

QUESTION 29: What comments do you have on the inclusion of examples of impact arising from research activity and bodies of work as well as from specific research outputs?

It would help to acknowledge a greater diversity of research activity linked to impact. Restricting the underpinning research to specific research outputs limits the ability of people to evidence the impact of their work.

The notion of a 'body of work' is helpful. An individual's or group's embodied expertise (their 'body of work') is often what fuels the impact, and includes the development of research networks; research facilities and resources (virtual and physical), and an individual's own expertise.

This was demonstrated in the ESRC study in 2011 to examine the influence of Social Science on the development of UK Child Poverty Policy. The review revealed that there had been very significant influence, but that the 'pathways to impact' had involved a variety of mechanisms. The research outputs themselves were only part of the story:

'While policy documents cite a relatively small number of key research papers and/or authors, this is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of research impact. Our consultations suggest that formal, semi-formal and informal interactions (including secondments) between academics and government researchers are key mechanisms through which research findings are taken into account in policy development'. [Conceptual Impact Of ESRC Research: Case Study of UK Child Poverty Policy](#) (ESRC, 2011)

We would argue that 'bodies of work' should be defined as a coherent area of research activity that forms the foundation for the claimed impact, with a clearly defined:

- Purpose
- Focus and coherence
- Methodological rigour

In describing that body of work, case study authors should be invited to describe the focus of the research and its significance, both inside and outside academia:

- What was the challenge / issue / uncertainty that it set out to address?
- What were the key findings, and what was the contribution to the research field?
- What were the key research outputs that underpinned the impact?
- What were the key 'hooks' that made the research of interest to people outside academia?
- What other mechanisms were deployed to build a coherent and accessible portfolio of research activity? (networks; secondments; datasets; shared research facilities etc)

Given the focus of the REF upon assessing excellent research, there is a clear challenge about how to set an appropriate quality threshold for a broader portfolio of research activities. We explore this challenge in our response to question 31.

QUESTION 31: What are your views on the suggestion that the threshold criterion for underpinning research, research activity or a body of work should be based on standards of rigour? Do you have suggestions for how rigour could be assessed?

We believe it is essential that the body of research that is associated with the case study should meet standards of rigour. To maintain the credibility of the REF as an assessment of **research** excellence, we suggest that the criteria used to define excellent research in the outputs section are adapted to provide a 'minimum' standard for 'bodies of work' submitted as part of an impact case study. An excellent 'body of work' should evidence how it embodies the quality characteristics and should demonstrate significance and rigour.

We suggest that the term 'coherence' might usefully be added to capture the contribution of the activity to building knowledge that is meaningful and useful inside and outside higher education:

***Coherence:** the body of work and expertise embodied in the individual /team, forms a coherent and compelling intellectual contribution to an academic field and to identifiable communities outside academia*

**QUESTION 32: Evaluation of REF 2014 found that provision of impact evidence was challenging for HEIs and panels. Do you have any comments on the following:
c. Other comments about evidencing impact**

We have outlined a number of ways in which we could build on REF 2014 earlier on our response, including:

- Add the assessment of 'rigour' to assessment of the reach / significance of the impact (outlined in our response to q.22) and in the process make more explicit the role of different types of evidence
- Consult on the criteria for the panels and seek to ensure intelligent alignment with other sectors' impact frameworks to facilitate evidence capture (we expand on this in Q.40)

There is great value in also building on the 2014 REF. The case study database provides a rich resource to identify examples of effective evidence of impact. The NCCPE's review of public engagement in the REF ('Reviewing public engagement in REF 2014 Reflections for shaping the second REF') developed a set of frameworks which describe credible and effective ways for reach, significance and impact to be captured in a case study. We suggest that this work provides a solid and pragmatic foundation for the development of guidance for REF 2012. It can be accessed here:

https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/reviewing_pe_in_ref_2014_final.pdf

The NCCPE review also identified the significant challenge of finding meaningful and convincing ways of conveying the impact of many of the very subtle processes involved in engaging the public with research, for instance when emotional or imaginative responses have been generated. There is a significant opportunity to investigate these challenges further, building on work to investigate the 'science' of impact assessment, for instance in the recent AHRC report, '[Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture](#)'. This report outlines a very helpful framework for describing the complex ways in which engagement with arts and culture affects individuals, and could provide a rich evidence base to inform the development of impact criteria and guidance for REF 2021

IMPROVING IMPACT AND EVALUATION LITERACY

There is a risk that impact becomes a box ticking and game-playing activity. More needs to be done to frame it as a drive to 'making a difference'; to reflecting robustly and critically upon it. By including rigour into the assessment of impact, it will help mitigate against potential box ticking in the sector.

Agencies like the NCCPE, ARMA, LFHE, NCUB and VITAE have a key role to play in energising professional practice and leadership in this area, along with UUK, GUILD HE, the mission groups and the Learned Societies.

The NCCPE, as secretariat for the [National Forum for Public Engagement in STEM](#), is currently coordinating a review of evaluation practice across the STEM. This will lead to a variety of recommendations for how collectively the quality of such practice can be improved.

QUESTION 35: Do you have any comment on the ways in which the environment element can give more recognition to universities' collaboration beyond higher education?

We argued in our response to Q.21 that it would be more helpful if the REF was framed as an exercise to assess 'excellent research' and 'excellent societal engagement'. This framing provides a very helpful starting point for addressing how the environment element might give more recognition to universities' collaboration beyond HE. There is an extensive literature on the subject of knowledge exchange which identifies a robust and coherent set of principles which have been proven to underpin effective approaches to collaboration. Examples include ESRC's Taking Stock work; the Dowling Review; the Carnegie UK InterAction report. The NCCPE has also undertaken an review of the impact templates of highest scoring units of assessment.

Common to all three reports and the NCCPE review are the following proven activities:

- How the research team involves research users / publics at all stages of the research, not just for dissemination or commercialisation purposes
- How the team makes it easy for externals (individuals or organisations) to make contact, e.g. through helpdesks; employing brokers
- How the team facilitate 'deep' interaction between researchers and uses/publics through (for instance) advisory groups; secondments;
- How individuals are recognised and rewarded for this work (e.g. through promotions criteria)
- How they support staff and students to develop their skills through training and professional development.

These principles are enshrined in the [Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research](#). It is critical that the guidance references this Concordat. RCUK and Wellcome's recent report ('The State of Play: Public Engagement with Research in UK Universities') makes a number of recommendations which reinforce the need for strategic investment in collaboration and engagement.

The NCCPE has developed a range of resources which support research teams to assess the effectiveness of their support for public engagement, including a self-assessment tool (the [EDGE tool](#)) and a benchmarking process (the [Engage Watermark](#)). These align with the principles of the Concordat and the extensive literature into how to support effective engagement. We would expect the environment element to require universities to provide concrete evidence of how they have invested in effective support for engagement, and the steps they have put in place to assess the effectiveness of that investment. The Engage Watermark would provide one such source of evidence.

We would argue that the weighting of the Environment profile should be increased from 15 to 20% to reflect its increased scope, and that 10% of the profile is focused on the research environment, and 10% on engagement / impact. We would recommend that the Impact profile remains at 20%, and that Outputs are reduced from 65 to 60%.

QUESTION 44: Are there proposals not referred to above, or captured in your response so far, that you feel should be considered? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF THE REF IN GALVANISING CULTURE CHANGE

REF has proven to be far more than a resource allocation tool – it has driven significant culture change. In public engagement, for instance, it has generated lots of new interest. It has also had unintended consequences (where, for instance, PE has been side-lined as it has been seen to be too ‘risky’ to submit; or where types of engagement that don’t ‘fit’ with the REF definition have been discouraged).

REF will continue to be a major driver of culture and behaviour so it is important that the guidance makes explicit the behaviours which are assumed to be ‘positive’ and is also clear about those which the funders wish to discourage.

Our recommendations assume that the following behaviours lead to more effective impact and therefore should be encouraged:

- Partners experience the HE sector working in increasingly engaged and responsive ways
- The HE sector is respectful of the expertise and motivations of publics / partners and committed to developing research that is increasingly well tuned to society

Clarifying the guidance in the ways we have suggested will make a significant contribution to realising these ends.

We would suggest that this would be further reinforced by revisiting the relative weighting of outputs, impact and environment. There is a strong case for increasing the weighting of Environment from 15 to 20% (and reducing outputs from 65 to 60%).

ALIGNING THE REF WITH OTHER IMPACT FRAMEWORKS

The assessment of impact is something most, if not all, the sectors that researchers engage with are also preoccupied with. It is important that consideration is given to the alignment between REF panel criteria and outcomes/impact frameworks being used in other sectors.

Light touch consultation as the new criteria are developed would send a clear message to other sectors that the HE sector is keen to work collaboratively and make it easier for collaborators to align evaluation activity to capture evidence which can meet several purposes.

One example of such a framework is the Generic Learning Outcomes framework developed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which is still used extensively across the cultural sector and provides a robust means of evaluating the outcomes arising from informal learning. It provides an excellent example of how an ‘external’ outcomes framework might be drawn upon by the HE sector to inform the guidance for REF 2021.

Our conversations with a range of organisations with a potential stake in the REF indicate how much they would value the HE sector seeking such alignment, and how much expertise they could offer to accelerate the process. For instance,

‘In the area of the natural environment, the impact criteria should be sensitive to the latest thinking and evidence needs of, for example, the Government’s 25 year planning for the environment, Natural England’s Conservation Strategy, The Prime Minister’s Dementia Challenge and Sports England’s and Public Health England’s plans to address obesity and physical inactivity’. (Jim Burt, Principal Specialist in Outdoor Learning and Diversity, Natural England.)