Research Excellence Framework consultation: University Alliance response

1. Established in 2006, University Alliance represents 22 major, dynamic, business-like universities at the heart of the sector which deliver world-leading research with impact and are actively business-focused.

2. Alliance universities are research engaged, providing a research informed, academic and entrepreneurial learning environment for students. These universities contribute valuable insights through peaks of excellent research which are recognised as world class, as demonstrated in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise and in the attached paper on concentration and diversity.

3. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this second consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Our response highlights some key principles which we would wish to see embedded within the REF as well as some specific comments on particular aspects of the proposals.

Principles for funding research

Support for the dual support system and the role of QR

4. University Alliance strongly supports the dual support system for research and the role of the funding councils in distributing the core grant as Quality Related (QR) funding. We recognise the REF as an essential component of a UK system which has driven the quality of UK research through a policy of selectively funding excellence in research wherever it exists. These drivers have improved the sector’s ability to deliver world class research, as demonstrated by the UK’s increased share of global citations.

The UK should continue to fund excellence in research wherever it is found

5. We support the aim of research assessment “to secure the continuation of a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum within HE”,¹ and believe that the best way to do this is to ensure that excellent research is funded wherever it is found. We believe that a continued policy of selectively distributing research funding, based on quality, is essential in order to continue to drive the quality and impact of UK research and secure the future.

¹ HEFCE, Research Excellence Framework: Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research, September 2009/38, p5
health of the UK research base. We therefore welcome the intention of the REF to continue to generate outcomes that are sufficiently fine grained to identify peaks of excellence and would expect the subsequent funding methodology to reward this accordingly.

6. We attach a separate paper on the issue of research concentration which outlines the relationship between excellence, concentration and critical mass in more detail alongside some examples of world-leading research with significant impact from Alliance universities.

Key features of the assessment framework

7. We are supportive of the overall intention to reform research assessment so that it can take account of demonstrable economic and social impacts as well as the quality and sustainability of a submitted unit’s research environment. We are encouraged to see a broad definition being used for both of these measures. This is in line with the Treasury Green Book’s broad definition of impact or benefit.2

8. As we set out below, however, we would welcome a shift of the weightings to reward these aspects so that outcomes account for 70%, impact for 15% and environment for 15%. This would reflect concerns that the 25% weighting currently proposed for impact is too high given the difficulties in assessment and the fact that this measure remains relatively untested.

Outcomes

9. As the most accurate demonstration of quality it is right that outcomes should receive the highest weighting in the REF. This is the most tested measure in the proposals and one which we believe has been core to the success of research assessment to date. As such we would argue that the weighting for this element should be increased to 70%.

10. The graded profile is an important aspect of the ability to reward excellence wherever it is found as it enables the assessment process to identify peaks of excellence which determine the position of the UK as a world leader in research. The introduction of the graded profile for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) showed that these peaks of excellence were more widely distributed across the sector than had previously been recognised. In addition, analysis of citation

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2 http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/green_book_complete.pdf - see paragraphs 5.24 and 5.25
data shows that the average performance for the sector as a whole is only just below the ‘golden triangle’ institutions and almost identical to the performance of Russell Group research intensive universities (see attached research paper). If we are to support and reward excellence it is vital that there continues to be sufficient granularity to identify where excellence exists (see section on ‘substantive bodies of work’ for further information).

11. We welcome the approach which HEFCE has taken toward the development of the REF and particularly the way that the funding council has taken on board early concerns raised by the sector in relation to the use of citations. We are pleased to note a cautious approach to the use of citations, in recognition that they are still developing in most areas and that there are differences across disciplines.

Impact

12. Alliance universities have a strong track record in engaging in near market research and development work which is underpinned by the excellence revealed in the 2008 RAE results. Our universities are adept at utilising world-leading research to achieve significant economic and social impact (as demonstrated by the case studies included in the attached paper). We understand the importance of the REF promoting impact alongside excellence in order to maximise the benefits of our research innovations and welcome the inclusion of impact in principle.

13. We support the broad definition of impact proposed to incorporate economic, social, public policy, cultural and quality of life impacts in order to ensure that the measure is applicable across the Units of Assessment (UOAs).

14. We do, however, have concerns that the 25% weighting currently proposed is too high given the difficulties in assessing impact and the fact that this measure remains relatively untested. We acknowledge that this element is still undergoing development through the pilots which are currently underway and support HEFCE in this approach. We would not want to pre-empt the findings of this work but at this stage Alliance universities have raised significant concerns about the robustness of the impact measure. We therefore suggest that this measure should be re-weighted to 15%.

15. We are also concerned about the proposed timing for the pilots. University Alliance would recommend that the implementation of this element is delayed in order to allow further consultation with the sector and to ensure that final proposals are sufficiently robust.
16. In particular, we have identified the following issues which should be considered as part of the further development of this measure:

- There needs to be a stronger recognition that impact relates to users, beneficiaries, and audiences rather than simply ‘users’.

- We welcome the proposal that assessment should be made of the submitted unit as a whole rather than of each submitted research output.

- We have concerns that 10-15 years may not be an appropriate timeframe for all subject areas. We suggest that further work is needed to ensure that the timeframe is appropriate and that the mechanisms are sufficiently flexible so as not to disincentivise new and emerging research.

- Attribution remains a significant concern for the ‘Impact’ measurement. Major impacts on society often arise from a large body of research undertaken at a number of different institutes through large-scale collaborative approaches. This is particularly important where a multi-disciplinary approach is required. It is therefore important that any rules implemented around attribution do not inhibit such collaborative behaviours. We highlight further issues in relation to collaboration below.

**Environment**

17. We support the broad definition of environment proposed so that a range of activities to support research infrastructure can be captured.\(^3\) In particular we are supportive of measures to support early researcher career development, an area in which Alliance Universities have developed much good practice.

18. Again this is an area which will be important to test thoroughly with further clarification and development of the definition of research environment and the elements contributing to this assessment prior to implementation. Key issues which still need to be addressed are:

- The need to ensure that there is clear water between impact and environment to avoid double accounting when looking at aspects such as ‘range of interactions’ (impact), ‘engagement’ (environment) and ‘research income’ (impact and environment).

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\(^3\) HEFCE, Research Excellence Framework: Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research, September 2009/38, p7
• Ensuring that research income is captured in a full and consistent manner and that the rules effect/enable this.

• Providing clear guidance on how the quantitative data will be used. Universities will need to be confident that the data is robust and accurately represents the correct position (for example on postgraduate numbers).

19. We have strong concerns about the suggestion to allow panels to “determine and provide guidance on the extent to which critical mass should be considered.” We support a differentiated approach across the different UOAs based on evidence showing the varying relationship between volume and excellence across subjects (see attached paper). However, we would strongly seek an evidence-based approach to ensure that clear guidance is provided to panels. Even in science based subjects, for example, research shows that there is no specific threshold for volume or critical mass and that volume is not the only factor in determining excellence.5

Collaboration

20. Institutional and even national boundaries for collaboration are becoming increasingly less relevant. UK internationally co-authored papers have risen from 32% in 1998 of total world publications to 45% in 2007.6 We also know that papers resulting from international collaborations are more frequently cited and published in higher impact journals than those with UK-only authors.7 The University Alliance has continuing concerns about the capacity of the REF to capture and support international collaboration as well as collaboration between universities in the UK.

21. Genuine encouragement of interdisciplinarity will be difficult to achieve in the proposed assessment structure of REF but HEFCE should work to mitigate any unintentional disincentives for collaboration. We expect that this is an area that will need monitoring.

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5 HEFCE, Research Excellence Framework: Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research, September 2009/38, p18
6 HEFCE Fundamental Review of Research Policy and Funding: Sub-group to consider the role of selectivity and the characteristics of excellence, Final report, 2000 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/review/
7 Evidence Ltd / Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, International comparative performance of the UK research base, July 2008
8 Professor Sir Gareth Roberts, International Partnerships of Research Excellence: UK-USA Academic Collaboration, April 2006
The research assessment process

22. In addition to the points raised above we would like to draw attention to the following more specific issues in relation to the research assessment process.

‘Substantive bodies of work’

23. It is important to make sure that the collation of evidence at the level of coherent research units that produce substantive bodies of work does not rule out the possibility of an individual researcher being submitted to a unit of assessment in the disciplines where it is proven that there is no relationship between excellence and volume.

24. There is clear evidence that there should be different approaches for different UOAs in this respect and that for some subjects it is appropriate to have lone researchers. For example, research undertaken for HEFCE as part of their ‘Fundamental Review of Research Policy and Funding’ proved, nearly a decade ago, that there is no direct correlation between volume and excellence outside some of the physical sciences – in the UK or internationally. RAE 2008 proved the extent to which peaks of world-leading research excellence exists across the sector. The research identified three general patterns or categories of relationship between volume and excellence (described as impact). These are summarised in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size (output volume) and impact within SUOAs</th>
<th>Clinical sciences</th>
<th>Biological sciences</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High impact at high volume -</td>
<td>E.g.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Low impact at low volume</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher impact at high volume –</td>
<td>E.g.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable impact at low volume</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>No clear pattern</td>
<td>E.g.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Arts and humanities</td>
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25. The research found that:

‘in the first model the size relationship is strongest… In the second model, large size clearly benefits quality but smaller units can still be effective. In the third model, research quality is not affected by size; this is the classic “lone researcher” model cited for the arts but it is interesting that it is also found in mathematics.’

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8 HEFCE Fundamental Review of Research Policy and Funding: Sub-group to consider the role of selectivity and the characteristics of excellence, Final report, 2000 [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/review/]

9 ‘super’ units of assessment (SUOA) – combined UOAs
26. In disciplines where there is ‘higher impact at high volume’ it is proven that smaller units can be successful and in disciplines where there is ‘no clear pattern’ between research quality and volume even lone researchers can undertake world-leading research to the benefit of the UK and should be supported. Further details are given in the paper attached.

Timeframe

27. To ensure that the process is sufficiently robust it is essential that universities are able to prepare in reasonable timeframes and that there is clarity and transparency about the process.

28. We are not convinced that the current proposed timeframe will allow for this given the scale of changes from RAE 2008 and believe that there is a strong case for pushing back the REF by a year. This would allow the new measures to be properly tested and implemented along with adequate guidance for the sector and would mean that institutions are given sufficient time to respond effectively.

Assessment panels

29. The University Alliance strongly supports expert peer review as the backbone of the assessment process. Peer review is an essential element of the research assessment process in the UK and is a key reason why RAE results have been recognised internationally as a reliable measure of quality.

30. In establishing the expert panels we would urge HEFCE to ensure that there is broad representation from across the sector. Some of our members have also raised concerns about the size (and manageability) of the larger UOAs.

31. A number of our members have raised concerns about the proposed Engineering panel given the potential size of this UOA. Specifically we are concerned that this panel may have a negative impact on universities with a Materials or General Engineering focus as these research interests will not necessarily map onto single subject Engineering disciplines. It has been suggested that the link between Materials Science and Applied Physical Sciences / Technology could form the basis for a new UOA which could sit alongside either a single Engineering UOA or a series of discipline specific Engineering UOAs.
Eligibility of staff

32. We support the notion that institutions should continue to select staff and outputs for submission to the REF. We welcome the encouragement given to institutions to include high quality applied and translational research outputs. We are particularly pleased to see the extension of ‘individual circumstances’ to include researchers recruited from business and other sectors. The intention to clarify and simplify the categories of staff eligible for selection is also to be welcomed although some concerns remain around Category C staff with some of our institutions.

Burden

33. We continue to support HEFCE’s attempts to reduce burden through the REF but recognise the inevitable burden of peer review and the engagement of universities. We support further efforts to increase efficiency without reducing the quality of assessment.

34. One area where HEFCE could ensure that the process is not unnecessarily burdensome would be to take a lead in developing guidelines for universities to take a uniform approach in the effective integration of management systems for research information including citation data.