

HEFCE | Consultation on the Internationalisation of the REF

University Alliance response, November 2014

1. University Alliance is a non-partisan, non-political organisation working to promote, safeguard and sustain the public benefit delivered by universities.
2. University Alliance brings together the UK's leading innovative and enterprising universities – major institutions combining science, technology and the creative industries with a focus on delivering for the professions, business and the community. Alliance universities have hundreds of research teams undertaking world-leading research, with over 50% of their research income in STEM-related areas. They employ 15% of the UK's university researchers, supporting around a quarter of all UK research teams undertaking world class research in Health and over a quarter of those in General Engineering, Architecture and the Built Environment. With strong industrial links they have a deep understanding of the strengths and needs of their regional economies, and how to maximise research translation and exploitation into real-world impact.

University Alliance response to HEFCE

What do you think the key benefits would be of expanding the REF internationally?

- International benchmarking of research quality
- Enhanced process of peer review
- Shaping the international agenda for research assessment

What do you think the key challenges would be in expanding the REF internationally?

- Potential for diminished reputation of REF
- Diversity in research systems and funding processes internationally
- Diminished flexibility of control over research environment in UK

In view of the potential benefits and challenges overall, how supportive would you be of further work to explore the issues in more depth?

- Supportive

Comments on developing an International REF

3. The REF is an important and valuable part of the UK research system. It has driven up standards and helped define and identify the wide distribution of research excellence in the UK.
4. Peer review is globally recognised as an essential part of the assessment process, underpinning the rigour and validity of results.
5. The flexibility of the research assessment system has allowed successive exercises to evolve in a manner which is responsive to the needs and changing context for UK research and can act as an effective behavioural driver.
6. UK research is internationally excellent and often undertaken in collaboration with international partners. Internationalisation of the REF would help with international benchmarking and recognise the global context for research.
7. However, internationalising the REF carries the possibility of undermining key strengths of the existing system. Clearly, the way that this initiative is developed may mean that these do not become a reality, but we urge that the following points be borne in mind as the approach is determined.
8. The REF currently acts as a USP for UK research and leverages inward investment, as businesses are attracted to invest in quality research which has been robustly validated. Spreading these benefits internationally may reduce the UK's competitive edge in this respect.
9. The REF acts as an effective behavioural driver, for example as seen in the new impact component which has helped shift academic culture towards communicating and considering the social value of research. Internationalisation of the REF would broaden the context in which decisions about the shape and priorities for research assessment, and could make the system less flexible and responsive to UK needs.
10. The burden on academics and universities is already large with a national research assessment system and relies on goodwill and a sense of contribution to a research community. Internationalisation must consider the how the burden of assessment duties on university staff would be mitigated.
11. The temptation may be to lighten the load by use of metrics but peer review must remain the keystone of research assessment.
12. In light of these recommendations, University Alliance is supportive of a pilot to test the feasibility of internationalising the REF. We would be pleased to offer our help to support the process.