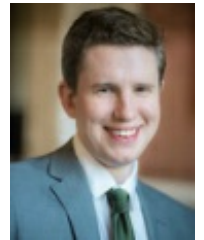


# Increasing REF's impact weighting could offer incentive for institutions to address societal, economic and global challenges

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/02/13/increasing-refs-impact-weighting/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/02/13/increasing-refs-impact-weighting/)

2/13/2017

*Challenges posed by events such as Brexit highlight the importance of excellent research programmes. Moreover, they represent a broader context in which the next Research Excellence Framework must consider 'impact'. But do current REF proposals go far enough towards doing this? **Matthew Guest** argues that there is not enough of an incentive for institutions to address heightened societal, economic and global challenges because the proposals do not directly link into the wider national agenda. Increasing the overall weighting for impact might go some way towards rectifying this problem.*



The REF consultation invites us to comment on impact and in particular the recommendation to broaden and deepen its definition. This is a welcome approach.

It's very easy for those of us who work in the higher education sector to get caught up in the nitty gritty of defining and implementing frameworks and measurements, rather than looking at their broader purpose and, dare I use the word, impact.

Research impact is viewed first and foremost as how research impacts upon itself. A paper is said to be impactful when it has been cited a high number of times. And it is right that importance is placed on generating knowledge for the purpose of advancing individual disciplines, and that excellence in such work is rewarded. But it's all too easy to leave it just at that: a valuable, heavily cited *paper* that the greater, non-academic community doesn't know about, let alone how to access.

We need to place greater emphasis on taking that knowledge out into the world, translating theory into practice, and learning from what goes on outside academia to address today's greatest societal challenges.



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**Proposed definitions of impact**

Looking at the word cloud above, you might say impact is central to REF2021. To an extent, I agree. It's great, for example, HEFCE and the other funding bodies have got two universal definitions for impact:

*“Academic impact: the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to academic advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, methods, theory, application and academic practice.*

*Wider impact: an effect on, change to or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond academia.”*

The definition for academic impact is good. The second, whilst broad, could go further. For example, listing a few ways in which research can affect the wider world could unintentionally limit research impacts (does, for example, culture include arts? What about impacts on technology?)

It's worthwhile remembering that the dictionary definition for 'impact' is “the action of one object coming forcibly into contact with another”. It's a violent verb and noun, not something easy to avoid. So what is the big bang our research aims to make? What is that actual tangible change we are trying to achieve? This can be hard to think through, yet must be fundamental to any research we undertake.

**So what?**

This second definition of research impact is particularly important because we face heightened societal, economic and global challenges (in which Brexit is both evidence and potentially future cause). Excellent research is fundamental here. And government is starting to see this. Research is, for example, the first pillar underpinning [the new industrial strategy](#).

Yet the REF proposals around impact do not go far enough. They do not provide enough of an incentive for

institutions to address such challenges because the proposals do not directly link into the wider national agenda.

Still, it's promising to see that further guidance on the impact of public engagement is proposed. Such guidance must help us get better at telling the story of what our research achieves. It should help us show the immense differences work across all disciplines makes beyond academia.

## **A challenge and a solution**

By thinking about research programmes and their interactions with wider society, we have the potential to greatly advance the difference our work makes. REF can help incentivise us to think in this way, through greater linkages to schemes, such as the Global Challenges Research Fund and the new Industrial Strategy Challenges Fund.

One such way to do this would be to increase the weighting for impact above 20 per cent (Stern's recommendation after all suggested the impact should account for **at least** 20 per cent of the exercise). Given our wider context, an impact weighting of 30 per cent, for example, would encourage us to consider both types of research impact further.

This of course could be challenging for researchers and institutions. Part of the solution may lie in what we can learn from the wider charitable sector, where the impact initiative is much further advanced.

Hundreds of charities dedicate web space to demonstrating their impact. Organisations such as [NPC](#) and [Cass CCE](#) lead the way in helping others think through their theories of change and impact cycles. The [Great Ormond Street Hospital Charity](#), for example, offers a really clear report focusing on how they achieve their impact, tying their research strand into their overall mission. [Young Enterprise NI](#) has a clear theory of change tied into their desired objectives. Similarly, Mind, the mental health charity, uses a [blend of stats and stories](#) to show the difference their work makes.

Such approaches may help us address the challenges in demonstrating the criteria of reach and significance holistically.

## **In conclusion**

There are two questions that we continually need to ask ourselves: "what is the change I am seeking to make?" and "so what?" If we can clearly define and answer these for ourselves, we stand a better chance of defining it for others, and taking steps to truly understand our impact.

So we should be daring and challenge ourselves by increasing the overall weighting of impact within REF. Doing so will make a more compelling case for our work within the wider world.

*GuildHE and CREST broadly welcome HEFCE's development of the Stern recommendations. Like others, there are a few areas in the current proposals where we have concerns. For example, fixing the number of outputs at one rather than zero per researcher could lead to undue pressure on certain groups. Further discussion is best reserved for our consultation response (which you'll be able to find on [our website](#) after 17 March 2017).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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