

# How should we balance the research impact ecosystem?



*Currently there is much discussion around research impact as REF 2021 preparations intensify. However, universities that are preoccupied with impact case study submissions to the next exercise may be missing the bigger picture. **Jenny Ames** emphasises the importance of establishing and nurturing a research impact culture; one that can help a university to achieve its vision more broadly and deliver benefits beyond the REF.*

Discussion around impact for the next UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2021 is ongoing. Julie Bayley [summarised](#) a high-level discussion held in January 2018. More recently, Steven Hill [considered](#) how best to strike a balance between nurturing new impact case studies and those that continue from REF 2014. His suggestion to take a portfolio approach (some of each) seems wise, where there are great examples of both. Institutions can easily get wrapped up in “playing to win the REF game”, including for impact. Unquestionably, it is important that universities do as well as possible with their impact case studies in the REF. It matters from financial and reputational perspectives.

Leading up to REF 2014, I oversaw returns to Units of Assessment across Panels A and C and reviewed draft submissions to all main panels. This made me aware of good knowledge of impact among impact case study leaders, UoA leaders and impact managers. In contrast, awareness of research impact among other researchers and staff who were not researchers was hazy on the whole. The situation has improved, but still there are gaps in understanding of impact among some staff.

But research impact is about more than the REF. The bigger picture and values of the university need to remain centre-stage for staff. I believe we are dealing with a research impact ecosystem, one that has a number of dimensions. Its shape and form will vary according to the nature of the university. In a previous [post](#) I summarised potential key elements of a research impact culture.

Over the last year, I have heard research impact managers say that their job is in two parts: (a) to help develop the best possible impact case studies for the next REF; and (b) to develop the research impact culture. No doubt some universities have established, and are nurturing, an excellent research impact culture. But this is not the case for all institutions, including for some where time and money to help are more limited.

## Beyond REF 2021

I believe that developing a research impact culture is extremely important. In some situations it may need at least as much resource as developing case studies for REF 2021. Why do I put so much emphasis on research impact culture? It's a bit like teaching someone how to cook rather than providing them with a meal on numerous occasions. It takes a bit of time to teach them but in the long run there are time savings and other benefits.

In my opinion, putting in the spadework now lays the foundations for excellent impact case studies for the REF after 2021. And the one after that. It makes a much greater number of people in the university aware of the importance and power of research impact. It also helps them to understand other ways in which research can help the university to achieve its vision. A growing research impact culture or environment also supports those who are developing case studies for REF 2021.

Achieving impact from research takes time. Not all funders require a pathways to impact statement and some research is funded by the institution. If insufficient attention is paid to developing the research impact culture so that researchers consider impact holistically, starting at the pre-conception stage of a new research project, the true potential of the research to yield impact may never be realised.

## Beyond the REF?

A focus on research impact can have so many more benefits in addition to impact case studies for the REF. Many of these other benefits may begin with powerful news stories about research. These raise the profile of the university and its work locally and globally. They may in turn attract more student applicants. Or lead to consultancies with business that are not necessarily underpinned by research. Or collaborations with other organisations for all kinds of purposes. All this can happen because the presence of particular expertise within the university has been made clear. Other benefits might include enhancing the student experience by involving students in engagement activities on the pathway to impact.

Often, these benefits may not class as impact in the REF sense. But we need to keep up with thinking from the REF team about what is “in” and “out” of scope for REF 2021. This includes the broadening of the relationships between impacts and underpinning research outputs to include a wider body of work or research activity. In any case, these benefits can occur and they can help the researchers, other staff, students and their university.

Clearly, it is up to individual universities to decide the components and balance of their own research impact ecosystem. They may be quite different, reflecting the mission of the institution.

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### **About the author**

**Jenny Ames** had a 35-year career both as an academic and a senior university manager before establishing Jenny Ames Consulting Ltd in 2017. She has led on all aspects of research at faculty and university level. She was also founding Research Impact Lead for University Alliance. Jenny Ames Consulting Ltd was founded to initiate, nurture and sustain strategic partnerships stemming from the needs of society, the outputs of academic research, and the expertise residing in universities. These partnerships involve universities and organisations including the private, public, and charity sectors, civic society and communities.