

Research Fortnight September 2016

Stern Review of the REF

Nicholas Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework, commissioned by the government in November last year and published in July, recommended an evolutionary course with some revolutionary elements.

The revolutionary suggestions include separating staff from research outputs to ensure disciplinary units of assessment are evaluated rather than individuals; the non-portability of outputs, so that when researchers move, their outputs remain with the institution where they were produced for assessment purposes; and an institutional level of assessment, designed to recognise interdisciplinary and collaborative work.

I'm also particularly interested by Stern's recommendation that "all research-active staff should be returned in the REF". I would have preferred better language than 'returned' but it is at least better than 'submitted'.

Past exercises assessed the outputs of independent researchers, defined either contractually or through track record as a principal investigator. Universities sometimes struggled to determine who fell into this category. It was assumed to apply to any lecturer, but had to be demonstrated for research fellows and the like. Making eligible the outputs from anyone contracted to undertake research would resolve this issue, levelling the playing field between groups that are sometimes, inappropriately, treated as different types of staff.

Of course, widening the scope of assessment may also create pressures to make greater use of teaching and scholarship contracts, which has raised some concerns. If done appropriately, with those focused on delivering teaching being recognised and supported as much as those delivering research, it could lead to better working environments, rather than being a threatening situation.

The report does not define explicitly what 'research active' means. However, one figure quoted for the UK's population of research-active university staff—145,000—suggests that the authors have included all staff who have 'research' in their contracts, meaning those who do research only and those who do both research and teaching. This number is the headcount for 2014-15 from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. It equates to slightly fewer than 135,000 full-time equivalents (FTEs).

As an advocate of decoupling of staff from the assessment of outputs, I'd note that in this context, the number of staff is solely a means of determining the volume of outputs required for assessment. The multiplier—the average number of outputs per head, or more likely per FTE—need not be a whole number. Only the resulting total, at the level of the unit of assessment, must be an integer. One might also note that the number of staff used for this purpose can differ from the number used in the formula for calculating funding.

There are other questions on how to count the number of researchers: this could be done either on a single date or over a period. I would prefer the latter approach, as along with tying outputs to institutions rather than researchers, it would provide another counterbalance to knee-jerk recruitment.

This method would also reflect how units change in size. Should, for example, a unit that has grown from zero to 20 full-time equivalent staff have to produce the same volume of outputs as one that has employed 20 FTEs throughout the assessment period? This is particularly

important, as outputs will now have to be attributed to the unit, creating a challenge for new and growing units similar to the inclusion of impact assessment in REF 2014.

Another question that arises is who might qualify as an author of the submitted outputs. Any research-active member of staff during the census period, certainly. But should not postgraduate research students also be included? They have produced an output of the research of the relevant unit and institution. The process is intended to assess the research of the unit, not to assess individuals.

The recommendations, as a whole, are a significant step forward; they also resonate strongly with the submission made by the University of Sussex. Implementing them will take quite a bit of detailed work. It will be interesting to compare the technical consultation document from the funding councils due this autumn with the draft from autumn 2015 that was shelved when the Stern review was announced and which presaged a number of the review's recommendations.

It is crucial that the final guidelines for the next REF do not unnecessarily complicate the implementation of the review's recommendations. We should avoid over-engineering, even when it is driven by the best of intentions. I look forward to working with the funding councils and my colleagues to help complete this phase of redesigning the UK's research assessment mechanisms.

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