MeCCSA response to JISC consultation on design of the UK's future research assessment system

May 2022

Annex A: Consultation questions

Section one: purposes of research assessment

1. In addition to enabling the allocation of research funding and providing accountability for public investment in research, which purposes should a future UK research assessment exercise fulfil? Select all that apply.

a. Provide benchmarking information

b. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities

c. Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation

d. Create a performance incentive for HEIs.

We are uneasy about prioritising the above criteria since each poses particular problems. The use of assessment to guide resource allocation is, by definition, to limit future allocation to past performance. Research overly wedded to 'strategic national priorities' carries the danger of resulting in 'policy-led evidence' and of over-emphasising short term applicability or utility in the evaluation of research, thus endangering innovative and speculative research whose outcomes may not be immediately evident. We therefore welcome the primary justification for assessment being the need to provide accountability for public funding, and to offer evidence of the quality of research undertaken in UK higher education.

2. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?

We believe the primary purpose of any assessment exercise is to confirm and encourage research excellence wherever it is to be found and to ensure that the primary purpose of research in all fields is to foster the expansion of new knowledge and understanding, while recognising and facilitating change in both the location and character of research excellence

3. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation. *All could be fulfilled by better and more secure resourcing and better and more secure careers for academics, whether encouraged by research culture and assessment or otherwise.*

4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

Section two: setting priorities

5. To what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 9 (least important)

a. Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact. *4*

b. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises) *1*

c. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate *6*

d. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development *5*

e. Impact of the system on research culture *2*

f. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing *3*

g. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021 *8*

h. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance *7*

i. Robustness of assessment outcomes *9*

Our ranking of importance does not imply lower ranked purposes are 'unimportant'; also our ranking of item a. would be higher if 'impact' were properly understood to embrace positive contribution to society as well as narrowly economic calibration.

6. Relating to research culture, to what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)

a. Impact of the assessment system on research careers: *2*

b. Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion: *1*

c. Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations) *4*

d. Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research *3*

e. Impact of the system on open research *5*

f. Impact of the system on research integrity *6*

7. What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? Please set out the considerations and indicate where they should be located in the list of priorities.

We see it as a primary requirement for any assessment of research quality that it commands the support and trust of the academic research community and does not result in perverse incentives or procedures.   The system as developed over recent exercises has largely achieved these aims, and although the large effort and both time and actual costs remains of concern, would be unconvinced by any significant departure from recent practice. All considerations of the impact of research must embrace a wide understanding of such impacts, to include their contribution in many ways to the quality of social, civic, and public life and activities. It should be clear to submitting HEIs that EDI should be critical to all aspects of the environment statement.

8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

This question begs an interpretation of the phrase 'positive research culture'. We seek a system that allows a wide diversity of research excellence, is careful to eliminate any potential bias in favour of senior academics or better financed institutions, encourages research careers, and the capacity of all academics to undertake research where possible and desirable, and recognises research quality first and foremost in the contribution of outputs to knowledge and understanding.

Section three: identifying research excellence

9. Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?

(Multiple options: 'Should be heavily weighted' – 'Should be moderately weighted' – 'Should be weighted less heavily' – 'Should not be assessed' – 'Don't know')

a. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers) *L*

b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards) *M*

c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets) *H*

d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward) *M*

e. Engagement beyond academia   *M*

f. Societal and economic impact   *M*

g. Other (please specify).

10. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence? *We have concerns about the notion of 'impact' being properly understood to include a very wide range of contributions to social and public good. We also feel the importance of research to quality of teaching, should be recognised where appropriate, and this could appear in environment statements.*

11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know) *Y to each but added comment: the criteria need to be adaptable enough to work across the diversity of output types submitted, without assuming that any one output type is assumed to be the gold standard within a given field and ensuring that inter and cross-disciplinary work can be appropriately recognised.*

a. Originality

b. Significance

c. Rigour

12. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?

13. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate? (Yes)

a. Reach

b. Significance

We would stress the need for 'reach' to be clearly unrelated to geography, and also to ensure that both submitting institutions and panels are very clear that significance relates to public value, including widening public understanding and contributing in a variety of ways to civic culture.

14. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact? *It is unclear to us that the considerable effort that is often required to collate and submit supporting evidence is in fact fully used or recognised by panels.*

15. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)

a. Vitality

b. Sustainability

16. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment? *Guidance needs to be explicit about how all aspects of the research environment are considered when constructing the overall research profile. This is particularly important in relation to aspects which are likely to cut across different sections of the statement, including EDI issues.*

Section four: assessment processes

17. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:

a. stability

b. currency of information

c. both a. and b. *[ticked this but then noted comment in q'n 18]*

d. neither a. nor b.

e. Don't know.

18. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information? The e*xercise must allow for change so stability, meaning sustainability of research activity, is important, but research assessment must allow for units to develop research quality innovatively or for priorities to change*

19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?

a. Yes, split by main panel

b. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)

c. No *[ticked]*

d. Don't know.

20. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

Splitting the exercise by main panel would make calibration across panels and elements difficult and might produce unintended consequences for particular fields (e.g. whatever panel goes first effectively sets the standard all others will have to emulate or exceed).It is not obvious how cross-referral would work in this model, and this may have a disproportionate impact on inherently inter-disciplinary panels where much work in MeCCSA fields is submitted (e.g. Panels 33 & 34). It is difficult to see how splitting by assessment element would work, given it would likely mean different census dates for different elements, so might result in consequences for staff mobility.

21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?

a. Individual

b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas *[ticked this one; the main assessment is of outputs and it is most definitely not an assessment of either individual researchers or of institutions]*

c. Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes

d. Institution

e. Combination of b. and d.

f. Combination of c. and d.

g. Other (please specify)

22. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise? *We commented in 2014 about the composition of panels, and again, any further reduction of panel numbers to more composite or diverse panels would be awkward for many fields, including ours, as is the current separation, inappropriately, of film and screen studies, sometimes understood as practice work, and media studies etc., often more 'conventional' academic style. Any consideration of panel remit should appreciate the integration of work across the range of media, including all screen studies, and embracing both research as practice and other research, since these are commonly undertaken within the same UoA, and there should be no possible confusion, or disadvantage, for any submission to one panel as against another.   This has been achieved in the past, both in 2014 and 2021, by collaboration between the sub-panels, and by explicit explanation in the guidance. Further amalgamation of disciplinary areas would not be beneficial: this is something which is already in place in the units to which work by members of MeCCSA is most likely to be submitted, and can make results difficult to interpret as not comparing like with like. Institutional assessment could have serious implications for fields of different sizes and where research is less expensive to do.*

23. To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)

a. Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment

b. Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:

i. Outputs   *N*

ii. Impact *N*

iii. Environment   *N*

c. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:

i. Outputs   *N*

ii. Impact   *N*

iii. Environment   *Y*

d. Should not be used at all.

e. Other (please specify)

24. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

We regard metrics as wholly unsuitable for comprehensive research assessment. They can be useful (and if a panel considers it helpful) in informing, but not in determining, assessment of environment, but can be significantly misleading in some areas (such as using standardised metrics on impact factors for journals). Evidence submitted to inform decisions about REF2021 was clear about the limitations of metric-based assessment for research in many disciplines, not only in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. There is no new evidence we are aware of to challenge that. We have particular concerns that the use of metrics in output assessment may disadvantage non-standard output types and so stifle innovation, and is, at best, a proxy and limited calibration of 'quality' in all areas. For impact, it is important to ensure that the term is expansively defined and that the value of intensive impact with small communities remains recognised, which might make solely quantitative indicators misleading. In the use of any metrics for assessment of environment, it is important that these do not encourage panels to simply replicate existing inequalities (e.g. between types of institutions) and that they do assist panels to identify excellence.

25. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate? *By requiring less at 'institution level'*