

January 2009

Update on the Research Excellence Framework

- 1 I am writing to update you on progress with developing the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and plans for further work and consultations with the sector.

Scottish Funding Council position

- 2 The Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) position in relation to implementation is unchanged from that described in our circular of 20 June 2008 (Circular letter SFC/34/2008). The following update should be read with this in mind.
- 3 The SFC has, as yet, taken no decision as to whether it will participate in the REF or whether it will use the output of participation in any future funding method. No decisions will be taken without consultation with the sector and other key stakeholders.
- 4 SFC however remains committed to working with HEFCE and the other UK higher education funding bodies on the development of a robust Research Excellence Framework.

Research Excellence Framework Development

- 5 A team based at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) are leading on developing the REF for the UK. HEFCE are working closely with the other UK higher education funding bodies and in consultation with the

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), and the Research Councils, to ensure that the REF fully complements other parts of the research funding system.

- 6 A UK-wide steering group has been set up with representation from HEFCE, SFC, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland.
- 7 In June this year, following a UK-wide consultation, some key changes were announced to the proposals for the REF (SFC/34/2008). The development timetable was also revised so there would be sufficient time for further consultation and development.
- 8 HEFCE are now in the process of developing detailed proposals, the aim being to design a framework that:
 - produces robust and rounded indicators of research quality across all disciplines;
 - provides a basis for distributing funding primarily by reference to research excellence;
 - recognises and rewards excellent research of all types;
 - avoids undesirable behavioural incentives;
 - avoids unnecessary administrative burden; and
 - promotes equality and diversity.

Progress so far

- 9 Within the REF, research will be assessed through a combination of indicators and expert review processes, including the reviewing of outputs, the use of bibliometrics and other quantitative indicators, and the use of supplementary qualitative information, as appropriate to each subject group. A key challenge is to design a 'common family' of such indicators and review processes for the REF as a whole, upon which each subject group can draw as appropriate, to inform robust and rounded overall quality profiles that take full account of all types of research.
- 10 HEFCE has begun to explore, initially through a high-level workshop, how such a framework should take account of research that is valued by users. The workshop identified several key issues that will be addressed in developing the 'family' of indicators and assessment processes. These include:

- how to ensure that the criteria for excellence give due weight to the rigour and originality of all types of research, while recognising different audiences in terms of the significance of different types of research;
 - how to build on efforts made in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to further encourage institutions to put forward a wide range of work for assessment in the REF;
 - how to refine the existing business research element of HEFCE quality-related (QR) research funding, introduced as an initial proxy for user value, and include an appropriate range of evidence to take account of user value and engagement with research users; and
 - how best to seek inputs from a wide range of research users into the assessment process.
- 11 Good progress has been made with the pilot exercise to test and develop a bibliometric indicator of research quality, so that this new way of measuring research can be a useful addition to the ‘family’ of indicators. The data collection stage of the pilot is nearing completion and I extend my thanks to all the institutions, including the three participating Scottish HEIs, that have worked at relatively short notice to process data for the pilot. HEFCE will now work with Evidence Ltd to analyse the data and test a range of models, and will publish the outcomes of this work in mid-2009. Work has also been commissioned to capture the experience of the pilot institutions and disseminate this to the wider sector. Further details of the pilot are provided at Annex A.
- 12 As the REF is developed, the funding bodies will wish to draw lessons from and build on the experience of the 2008 RAE, so that the REF can retain those elements that worked well while making changes where the framework can be improved.
- 13 HEFCE is establishing a series of expert advisory groups for the REF, drawing largely on chairs and members of RAE panels, as well as nominations from the Research Councils, research users and other key stakeholders. These groups will meet throughout the first half of 2009 and advise HEFCE in their development of detailed proposals for the REF. There are over 100 members, providing a broad coverage across the full range of disciplines and types of research and research users. HEFCE will seek their advice on all key features of the REF, including the ‘family’ of indicators and peer review processes to be included in the REF, how to combine them into overall quality profiles and the subject structure for assessment. As part of this these groups will be asked to review the outcomes of the bibliometrics pilot and advise on the interpretation and use of such data in the

REF. The members of the groups will be encouraged to consult with their wider communities to inform their advice. Further details of the advisory groups, including their membership, will shortly be available on the HEFCE web-site (www.hefce.ac.uk under Research/Research Excellence Framework).

- 14 HEFCE is working with partner organisations to review elements of the RAE and gather evidence about the potential impact on the sector of the transition from the RAE to the REF.
 - a. PA Consulting have been appointed, as part of a wider review of the accountability burden on higher education institutions, to identify the accountability burden associated with the 2008 RAE and assist in identifying opportunities for the REF to reduce burden.
 - b. The Equalities Challenge Unit has recently commissioned the Centre for Diversity Policy Research and Practice at Oxford Brookes University to review the equality and diversity measures taken in the RAE, to help identify institutional good practice and inform our approach for the REF. The funding bodies will also undertake a quantitative analysis of staff selected for the 2008 RAE.
 - c. The Research Information Network is commissioning work to investigate the influence of research assessment systems on researchers' publication behaviour.

Next steps

- 15 Throughout the first half of 2009 HEFCE will continue to develop proposals by analysing the bibliometrics pilot data, gathering evidence through studies, taking advice from the expert advisory groups and holding discussions with a wide range of stakeholders.
- 16 HEFCE will publish proposals on all the key features of the REF for consultation with the sector in autumn 2009, and they expect to announce the outcomes in early 2010.

Implementation in England

- 17 HEFCE remains committed to implementation of the REF in England in 2013, to drive QR allocations from 2014. The timetable for the transitional stages leading up to full implementation are yet to be determined in detail; the REF proposals to be published in autumn 2009 will include a proposed timetable for phasing in the REF leading to full implementation in 2013. At this stage, HEFCE envisages that during calendar year 2010 it will initiate a sector-wide bibliometrics process in an appropriate range of subjects. It is recognised that not all institutions will, at that stage, have systems in place that will have systematically recorded all relevant

research outputs. It is therefore likely that this first sector-wide bibliometrics process starting in 2010 will be developmental to some extent, and it will be used in England to inform a small element of funding only if found to be sufficiently robust.

Implementation in Scotland

- 18 As stated above, we have not committed to implementing the REF in Scotland, or using its outcomes for funding, and we will not make any such decisions without consultation with the sector and other key stakeholders.
- 19 A range of further information about the development of the REF is available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Research/Research Excellence Framework. Further information will also be available from time to time on the SFC's website at http://www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_research.htm
- 20 We look forward to further discussions with institutions over the coming months and to continuing to work in partnership to develop a system that will command the confidence of the sector.

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Annex A: Update on the REF Bibliometrics Pilot Exercise

The following is an update from HEFCE on the REF Bibliometrics Pilot Exercise. Three Scottish institutions are involved in the pilot. **'We' refers to the HEFCE based team that are leading on developing the REF.**

Aims of the pilot exercise

- 1 The pilot exercise aims to explore and test the following issues:
 - a. The scope of the bibliometrics exercise (which disciplines, and which categories of staff and papers should be included).
 - b. Data requirements and the processes for collecting data, including the implications and workload for institutions.
 - c. Our choice and use of source citation data (we are testing both the Web of Science and Scopus).
 - d. Methods of citation analysis.
 - e. The choice and use of citation indicators within the REF.
- 2 For the purposes of the pilot exercise, we are including research outputs for the period January 2001 to December 2007, across all disciplines that have at least moderate coverage in the available citation databases.

Progress so far

- 3 In June 2008 we selected 22 institutions to take part in the pilot exercise, and appointed Evidence Ltd to work in partnership with us to collect data and produce citation indicators.
- 4 Over the summer we asked the pilot institutions to provide data about research staff and outputs in relevant disciplines over the period January 2001 to December 2007. We deliberately sought data relating to all categories of research staff and including all known research outputs, so that we could test a range of models of citation analysis, using different sub-sets of the data. We also sought data about non-journal outputs to inform an assessment of the coverage of the citation databases.
- 5 All institutions submitted their databases to HEFCE by September. Evidence Ltd then processed the databases to bring them into a common template and ensure consistency across the data sets in the way bibliographic details were recorded, and to match journal articles to the Web of Science. This process has involved substantial work given the variations in the data sets that were available within the

institutions, and has highlighted a number of issues to be considered for future bibliometric data collection.

- 6 The systems implications for institutions are being explored by a Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) InfoNet project, which will initially produce case studies about the differing systems used by five of the pilot institutions to supply the required data.

Current work

- 7 Evidence Ltd is now supplying the cleaned data back to the institutions, and asking them to verify additional records found on the Web of Science that were not included in the institution's database but appear to be associated with the institution. This process will be complete by the end of December.
- 8 In parallel to the conclusion of the data collection phase, Evidence Ltd is calculating a range of benchmarks or normalisation factors, so that the citation count for each paper can be compared with worldwide average citation rates for the relevant field and year of publication. Several different ways of defining fields will be tested.
- 9 We are holding regular workshops with the pilot institutions to brief them, discuss the process and seek feedback on a range of issues. Details of the workshops, including presentations, briefing materials and notes of the discussions are available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Research/Research Excellence Framework/REF events.

Next steps

- 10 From early 2009 we will produce a series of citation indicators, using a range of different models and parameters, and we will analyse the effects on the outcomes of using these different parameters.
- 11 The outcomes will be provided to the REF expert advisory groups to review. We will ask them to advise on: preferred methodological options; which subjects suit the use of bibliometrics; and how to interpret and make use of citation indicators within the REF.
- 12 Outcomes will also be shared with the pilot institutions so we can seek their feedback on the interpretation and implications of using citation indicators.
- 13 We are also working with JISC Collections to begin to explore the options for common access to bibliometric data across the range of UK higher education users.

Dissemination

- 14 A full report of the pilot exercise will be published at the conclusion of the exercise. We expect to publish a wide range of indicators at different levels of

granularity, as well as a summary analysis. These will aim to fully inform the sector about the pilot process, the outcomes that were generated, and the effects on the outcomes of using different models and parameters for citation analysis.

- 15 We have commissioned Technopolis to work with the pilot institutions to capture their experiences of the pilot and the lessons they have learned through the process, and to share these with the wider sector during the remainder of the pilot exercise.
- 16 We are supporting six-monthly national conferences focusing on bibliometric developments, organised by King's College London.