



BRITISH
ACADEMY

for the humanities and social sciences

Response to HEFCE survey on internationalising the REF by the British Academy

General comments:

1. The internationalisation of the REF presents an opportunity that should be pursued only if there is evidence that it would improve upon the existing REF process. Currently, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that internationalisation would improve upon the existing process.
2. The HEFCE Survey asks what the key benefits and challenges of expanding the REF internationally would be. In order to judge how 'expanding the REF internationally' would impact on the UK HE sector, and therefore determine the key benefits and challenges of doing so, it is necessary to clarify what this expansion would entail. It is difficult to assess the impact of international expansion in isolation from the specific model by which it is achieved.
3. Moreover, the survey does not ask for the disadvantages of international expansion of the REF. As our comments note, international expansion of the REF would be clearly disadvantageous in numerous scenarios.
4. The need for clarity on the objective of the expansion exercise is crucial. The objective might be to reduce UK costs; attract research funding, researchers and students to UK universities; or more generally improve the profile of the UK in terms of its research quality. These are, however, quite different aims, with consequences that would have different impacts on the UK HE sector.
5. Ultimately, the purpose of the REF is to assess research in order to determine the allocation of UK research funding. International expansion of the REF should be pursued only if there is sufficient evidence that it would improve or at least not negatively affect that process. As HEFCE has no funding function internationally, there is a risk that internationalisation of the REF confuses its original function, e.g. with that of an international league table.
6. There is little in terms of existing research on this topic. This would be desirable in order to increase the evidence base on the potential impact on the humanities and social sciences, as well as the UK higher education sector more broadly, of expanding the REF internationally.
7. HEFCE should reflect further on the potential gains of internationalising the REF before conceding the utility of a costly and time-intensive pilot.

International expansion in the form of UK as international consultant:

8. If international expansion were simply to entail the further promotion of the REF for use in other countries, then the impact on the UK HE sector would be minimal. The

UK would act as consultant, as it already does for several countries, meaning that funding decisions for UK research would be unaffected.

International expansion in the form of genuine international comparison for research assessment:

9. Another scenario could involve carrying out research assessment on an international basis with individual institutions from a range of countries taking part.
10. International benchmarking already occurs under the current REF assessment through its assessment criteria and through its international panel members. A simple way of enhancing international expertise in the current REF process would be to increase the number of international reviewers on the current REF panels, notably from the US and research intensive nations in Europe.
11. In principle, the advantage for the UK of engaging in an international assessment process would be the provision of more accurate and credible international benchmarks of the UK research base in comparison with the US and other significant research intensive nations in Europe. More accurate benchmarking of the UK research base against these international counterparts could help make the case to government which elements of the UK's research are truly internationally outstanding and therefore worthy of significant public investment.
12. As has been widely acknowledged, however, due to fundamentally different funding systems and patterns of publication, comparison with the US and other significant research intensive nations in Europe is not readily practicable. Without this comparison, it is questionable whether internationalisation would be an improvement on current benchmarking.
13. An ad hoc selection of countries with which to compare the UK research base is of little advantage in making this argument. Currently, those countries that are interested in engaging in a joint assessment process, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and New Zealand, do not offer the possibility of generating useful evidence with which to make a stronger argument than can already be made about the quality of UK research.
14. Moreover, aspects of the current system which work well could be undermined by a joint assessment process involving an international panel of peer reviewers. While international peer review is potentially beneficial because of the richer assessment it could allow for, confidence in the assessors undertaking peer review could also be lost in an international panel of reviewers.
15. An international assessment would likely involve an increased burden on reviewers, which could make it more difficult for active researchers to participate in the review process. In order for peer review to offer a genuine assessment of the quality of research, reviewers need an intimate knowledge of the relevant academic environment. There is a risk that international assessment could become more formulaic and less nuanced.
16. These potential difficulties with an international system of peer review might be particularly acute in the arts and humanities and social sciences (HSS), where the

appraisal of quality is more contextual and reliant on an understanding of local academic environments. In some HSS disciplines, publishing in languages other than English may create problems for panel assessors.

Specific impact on the humanities and social sciences:

17. An issue of potential concern is how expanding the REF internationally might affect vulnerable subjects within the humanities. Subjects that attract relatively small numbers of students and researchers within the UK may appear relatively even smaller in an international comparison, potentially causing a threat to their existence.
18. An internationalised system of peer review may be particularly problematic for the arts and HSS, as is highlighted in paragraph 16.
19. Limiting an international exercise to Anglophone universities may affect humanities disciplines which tend to be more language dependent than other disciplines. It would also be important to consider the impacts of limiting the exercise to a common language, such as overvaluing publishing in that language, which may constrain researchers in some HSS disciplines. For this reason, it would be vital for any pilot that is undertaken to include a HSS discipline with multi-language characteristics.

Summary point on a potential pilot:

20. Clarity on the model, aims and intended benefits of internationalisation of the REF would be welcome before a pilot is considered. Moreover, it would be sensible to allow time to reflect on the operation of REF2014 before the nature of a pilot is finalized.

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