

REF2021: a whole lot of fun prizes to be won

Prof Andrew Hill shares his views on the financial value of REF2014 and how this will change after REF2021.

Introduction

Well, it's a REF (Research Excellence Framework) year and colleagues across the country will be working fervently to prepare submissions to unit of assessment 24 (UoA24; Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism). For those unfamiliar with the fun of REF, this is the system used to assess research quality and allocate research funding to UK higher education institutions.

There is still (just about) enough time for colleagues to get that paper published, submit that grant and gather that testimonial to help improve the submission. In order to do so, colleagues may need to ask for additional financial support and time, or both, from line-managers, heads of research and other such types. To help loosen the purse strings, consider highlighting the potential financial value of the submission you are contributing to and what also lies ahead.

Looking forward

The obvious next question is, how will things change as a consequence of REF2021 and how will this affect the prizes on offer? How the money is allocated within the three main areas is changing. Outputs are worth less (60%) and impact is worth more (25%). This change could be good news for the universities that did well last time in this regard. Other changes are likely to make things more perilous for everyone. REF2021 is set to be the largest REF ever. Universities will enter more staff into more units than before. Initial figures from the survey of universities submission plans suggest as much. There is an anticipated 61% increase in the number of staff being entered into Main Panel C in which UoA24 sits. This is the largest increase of any of the four Main Panels.

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Looking backward

Approximately £1 billion is distributed by Research England each year in the form of Mainstream Quality-Related funding. This money is allocated according to performance in three areas: outputs (65%); impact (20%); and environment (15%). Within each of these areas, the funding is derived from the volume of research submitted to REF2014 (the number of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff entered in the unit), quality ratings in each of the three areas (4* “World-leading” and 3* “Internationally Excellent” ratings receive funding on a 4:1 ratio), and subject weights/costs (three categories of subjects that range in expense). The latter is used as a cash multiplier that also considers the amount of money that is available to be allocated.

Using the data from the 2017-2018 mainstream quality-related research (QR) fund allocation as an example, we can see the prizes up for grabs (note, because mainstream QR fund allocation has increased slightly since 2017-2018, the figures are a slight underestimate).

For outputs, in REF2014, UoA26 (now UoA24), one 3* paper was worth ~£2,691 per year and one 4* paper was worth ~£10,765 per year. For impact case studies, one impact case study rated at 3* was worth ~£1,171 each per FTE per year and one case study rated at 4* was worth ~£4,685 each per FTE per year. The average FTE for UoA24 was 15.6, so that's ~£18,267 or ~£73,086 per year.

For environment statements, an environment statement rated at 3* was worth ~£1,696 per FTE per year and an environment statement rated at 4* was worth ~£6,785 per FTE per year.

So, based on an FTE of 15.6, this is ~£26,458 or ~£105,846 per year.

Now imagine that your university could receive this money every year (it does). Not a bad investment of time and other resources for a sport and exercise science department.



Prof Andrew Hill

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