



REF2021: Let's have a look at what you might have won

Prof Andrew Hill reviews the results of REF2021 and considers “what next?” for those who entered.

Introduction

As we now enter the warm down of the latest Research Excellence Framework (REF2021), and everyone is digesting the results of unit of assessment 24 (UoA24; Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism), it is time to take a closer look at how everyone fared, the notable changes from the previous exercise, and what it might all mean for sport and exercise science departments.

members of the UoA24 panel in regards to “originality,” “rigour,” and “significance”.

There has been a shift in UoA24 towards a greater proportion of research outputs being recognised in the two highest categories which have previously provided financial returns for universities - “world-leading” (four-star) and “internationally excellent” (three-star).

“ In REF2014, weighted for FTE, the proportion of research outputs considered at least either four-star or three-star was 61.7%. This has now risen to 83.8%.”

Overview

As expected, REF2021 was the largest research evaluation exercise yet with more universities and more staff entered this round time than ever before. Just over 52k Full Time Equivalent staff (FTEs) were entered into the last REF (REF2014) and just over 76k FTEs were entered in to REF2021, making it 43% larger.

UoA24 was larger still – a whopping 71% larger - with FTEs increasing from 790 to 1452.9, and a net increase of 10 universities entering the assessment. There were 13 completely new entries, 3 returners who skipped REF2014, and 4 exits, taking the total number of universities in UoA24 to 61. These increases saw the size of the average entry in UoA24 increase from 15.5 FTE to 23.8 FTE.

Two notable newbies to UoA24 were Russell-group universities submitting to the UoA for the first time – Durham University and University of Nottingham. This takes the number of representatives from this group of 24 research-intensive universities to eight. And, also of note, was Manchester Metropolitan University who were among the largest new entrants (52.80 FTE).

More submissions, typically larger submissions, and an altogether more competitive affair for sport and exercise science departments seeking to make their case for research excellence in regards to their outputs, impact, and environment.

Research Outputs

Let's start with outputs which is the category of the submission worth the most (60%). Research outputs were assessed by two

In REF2014, weighted for FTE, the proportion of research outputs considered at least either four-star or three-star was 61.7%. This has now risen to 83.8%. This shift provides increased recognition for sport and exercise science departments regarding the quality of research that is taking place in UK universities.

At first glance, there has also been significant change regarding the universities who are producing the research outputs that are receiving recognition. The top five places for REF2021 are taken by universities who all received ratings of 100% four-star and three-star for their research outputs. These include newcomers to UoA24, University of Leicester, University of Nottingham, and Durham University, who join Bangor University and University of South Wales. With their outstanding scores, these universities form a completely new line-up at the top of the table in comparison to REF2014.

Things start to look a little more familiar when we consider the likely financial return, though. When the relative weighting of four-star and three-star scores (currently 4:1) is considered alongside the size of submission (FTE), Loughborough University, Liverpool John Moores University and University of Birmingham emerge as the top three earners. This was also the case in REF2014. In at least some changing of the guard, these universities are now joined by the biggest newcomer, Manchester Metropolitan University, and one of the highest climbers, Northumbria University.

Research Impact

Now let's take a look at research impact. This part of the submission was introduced in REF2014 and is worth 25% of the submission. It was assessed using impact case studies which were reviewed by an expert panel of academics and non-academics in regards to “reach” and “significance” of the impact.

Each submission included at least two impact case studies with larger submissions (>19.99 FTE) requiring more. Twenty-five submissions exceeded the lower threshold and required additional impact case studies. The largest number of case studies was provided by Loughborough University (n = 7; FTE = 94.9).

There were 168 impact case studies, in total, providing a fantastic account of the positive societal change brought about by sport and exercise researchers. Once made publicly available, they will hopefully be put to good use and celebrated widely.

In REF2014, weighted for FTE, the proportion of research impact considered either four-star or three-star was 71.6%. This has now risen to 84.9%. A smaller increase than for research outputs but a sizeable increase, nonetheless.

Four universities received scores of 100% world-leading impact case studies - University of Leicester, Kings College London, University of Portsmouth, and University of Exeter. Only one university managed this feat last time (University of Bristol).

Thirty universities, in all, received ratings of 100% either four-star and three-star for their case studies (49% of all submissions), almost double the 17 universities in REF2014 (33% of all submissions).

The proportion of universities scoring at least some percentage of three-star (i.e., fundable) rating for their impact case studies has increased, too. In REF2014, this was 42 of 51 (82%) universities and in REF2021 it was 59 of 61 (97%) universities.

Interestingly, none of the universities with exceptional scores of 100% four-star ratings are in the top five institutions in regards to likely financial return. In fact, only one is in the top ten. The highest places go to institutions that have been able to combine less eye-catching, but still impressive, four-star and three-star ratings with large submissions (FTE): Loughborough University, Sheffield Hallam University, Leeds Beckett University, Northumbria University, and University of Birmingham.

Research Environment

The final part of the submission is research environment. This is the smallest part of the submission at 15%. It was assessed by three panel members using a rather tortuous environment statement, looking for evidence of “vitality” and “sustainability,” and included two key metrics, research income and doctoral student completions since REF2014.

There has been notably less change in this category. The average score, weighted for FTE, in REF2014 was 74.9% (four-star and three-star) - only a marginal increase in REF2021 to 76.7%.

Three universities scored 100% four-star for their environment and these are same three that did so in REF2014 (Loughborough University, Liverpool John Moores University and University of Birmingham).

Twenty-three universities scored 100% four-star and three-star this time round - up from 19. However, as a percentage of the total number of submissions, this has actually decreased (45% to 38%). This is partly explained by some of the newest entries being among the lowest scores in this category.

Marrying their impressive 100% four-star scores with large submissions (FTE), the top three also have the highest likely financial return in order of size. To complete the top-five, these are followed by Leeds Beckett University and Northumbria University who squeeze out higher scoring submissions due to their comparative size.

What next?

Institutions that submitted to REF2021 are now (at the time of writing) waiting to hear from UKRI regarding the funding they will receive based on their results. This is an important moment that will strongly influence research in sport and exercise science departments for the next six to seven years - resources, expectations, and aspirations.

The prediction of likely financial return here is based on previous methods of allocating funding. However, based on the results, it is difficult to see how UKRI can afford to fund universities and UoAs in the same way - there were significantly more submissions that included fundable work and submissions are now typically larger (FTE).

Put simply, UKRI may not be able to afford to reward research excellence where it has found it. At least, not in the same way. So, sport and exercise science departments might anticipate changes to the basis for funding decisions and the UKRI QR-funding formula.

The announcement that UKRI will be receiving a 14% increase in budget from their parent department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy over the next 3 years will help. This will see Research England's budget rise from 1.8B to 2.4B. However, the increase in FTE alone, holding performance constant, would account for almost all of this increase in budget. There are three other things that might be used to help balance the books.

1. UKRI could reduce the subject cash multipliers used to allocate money for research outputs, impact and environment, most likely by about half. This would see the cash value of four-star and three-star allocations, per FTE, slashed but all institutions with four-star and three-star work receive at least some funding.
2. They could change weighting of four-star and three-star work. The ratio was last changed in 2015 from 3:1 to 4:1. A similar increase in favour of four-star work would suit research intensive universities but see a number of universities have significantly reduced funding.
3. Finally, we could see a decision made that only four-star ratings are rewarded. A more extreme change but worth airing as a similar decision was made in 2010 to defund two-star work.

The implications of these changes for individual institutions depend on the specific nature of their submission. However, generally, these changes would see institutions disproportionately affected as we move down the table, more concentrated funding at the top of the table, and fewer submissions receiving any funding, particularly for impact and environment.

Summary

There is much to celebrate about the results of REF2021 and the accomplishments of our sport and exercise science colleagues - the UK is a centre for world-leading sport and exercise science research. We have a “big-three” of Loughborough University, Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Birmingham, but world-leading research is taking place in almost all universities submitted - large and small. However, there is now uncertainty regarding the implications of the results in terms of funding and whether research excellence will be rewarded everywhere it has been found. ■



Prof Andy Hill

Prof. Andy Hill is Head of Postgraduate Research and UoA24 lead at York St John University. He is also a BASES Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist and BPS Chartered Psychologist.