



# Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation

Approach and evidence

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EUROPE

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## Preface

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The higher education funding councils for England and Wales and the Scottish funding council asked RAND Europe to review the preparation process for the impact element of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 within higher education institutions in the UK, in order to assess the process and understand how it could be further improved.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the data gathered and is supported by a *Findings and observations* report that details the headlines from our analysis. It is intended for those responsible for the REF and, more broadly, for those in the higher education sector. It may also be of interest to others working in the evaluation of research impact.

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## Executive summary

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The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It replaces the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has occurred on a (near) quinquennial basis since 1986. The RAE assessed research excellence in universities by the quality of research outputs and other measures of the research environment, including research students, income and evidence of esteem. The REF also assesses research excellence, but on the basis of three main criteria: the *quality* of research outputs, the *wider impact* of research and the *vitality* of the research environment.

The allocation of research funding based on non-academic impact is relatively new, with the REF being the first example of its application across a research system. After a pilot exercise in 2010, the higher education funding bodies concluded that peer review of research impact case studies was a workable approach. HEIs were expected to submit examples of impact that occurred between 2008 and 2013, as impact case studies (REF 2014 Section: 3b), and a more general strategy of how they were facilitating impact and would continue to do so, as an impact template (REF 2014 Section: 3a). The weighting for the impact assessment part of the REF is 20 per cent of the total assessment in 2014.

Since the impact assessment element is new, in March 2013 the higher education funding councils of England and Wales and the Scottish funding council commissioned RAND Europe to conduct an evaluation of how HEIs prepared for the impact component of REF 2014. The evaluation is presented in two related documents: the *Findings and observations* report and the *Approach and evidence* report. This *Approach and evidence* report is a longer more detailed account of the evaluation structured around the methodological tasks adopted. It is aimed at those who wish to better understand the underlying evidence of our key findings and how we

collected and collated that evidence. The *Approach and evidence* report should be read alongside the *Findings and observations* report.

### Background to the REF

The REF (and before it the RAE) is one of the main vehicles for the allocation of research funding to universities in the UK from one of the four Higher Education funding bodies – the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland.

The REF is a process of expert review. HEIs are invited to make submissions to 36 different units of assessment (UOAs) across four main panels (A, B, C and D).<sup>1</sup> The submissions are assessed by an expert sub-panel at the UOA level, working under the guidance of an expert panel at the main panel level. Sub-panels apply a generic assessment criteria to produce an overall quality profile for each submission.

The primary purpose of the REF is produce assessment outcomes for each submission made by HEIs:

- The HE funding bodies intend to use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their research funding to HEIs, with effect from the academic year 2015–16.
- The assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment.
- The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks.

### This evaluation

The aims of this evaluation are set out in the box overleaf:

<sup>1</sup> A full list of the panels and UOAs can be found in Appendix A.

**Box S-1: Aims of the evaluation**

- Identify and describe the perceived challenges and benefits to HEIs and research users in preparing impact submissions to REF 2014
- Identify and describe the intended and unintended consequences of assessing research impact for HEIs and disciplines
- Formulate sound, evidence-based conclusions and recommendations to improve the process for preparing and submitting impact assessments for future REF exercises
- Ensure that innovative and good practices in research impact assessment as used during the submission process are identified and highlighted to HEIs, research users, HE funding councils and other stakeholders

Our overall approach to the evaluation is summarised in Figure S-1. We used a mixed-method approach and data were collected from three main stakeholder groups: those associated with the leadership and administration of the impact assessment element of REF 2014 in HEIs; those who led the development of impact case studies and impact templates (i.e. research academics); and research users (i.e. the beneficiaries of research).

A representative sample of 18 HEIs in England were systematically selected from the population of 123 HEIs who indicated their ‘intention to submit’ to REF 2014. HEIs were selected to oversample institutions making larger submissions, but also to ensure representation of the smaller ones at the same time. These 18 institutions were supplemented by one HEI in Wales and two in

Scotland, chosen by their respective HE funding councils (see Figure S-2).

We conducted site visits in order to gain qualitative insights into the process that HEIs went through in preparing submissions and to understand the benefits, challenges and consequences they perceived. We conducted two site visits to each of the 21 HEIs in our sample. The second site visit was more intensive and involved meeting a range of individuals involved in leading and supporting the HEI’s impact submission. In total, we held 126 interviews and met with 327 individuals during these second site visits. The gathered data were qualitatively analysed and coded using QSR NVivo 10 International software.

**Figure S-1: Project schema**

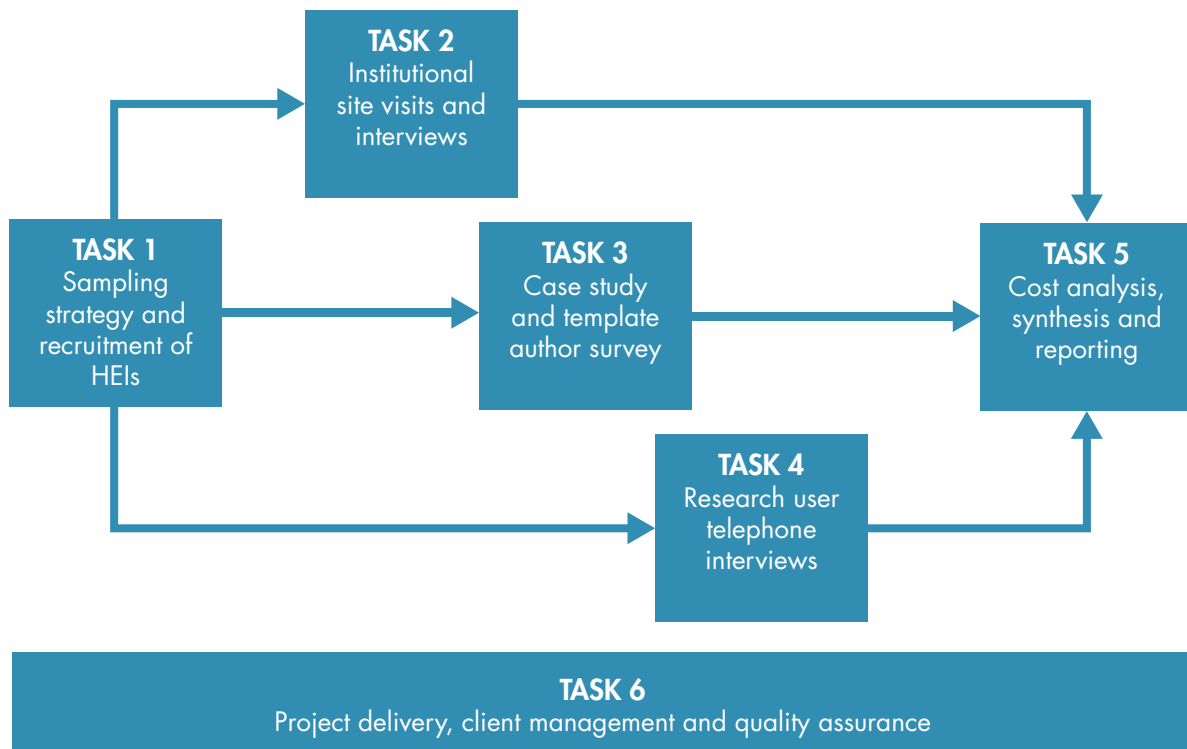
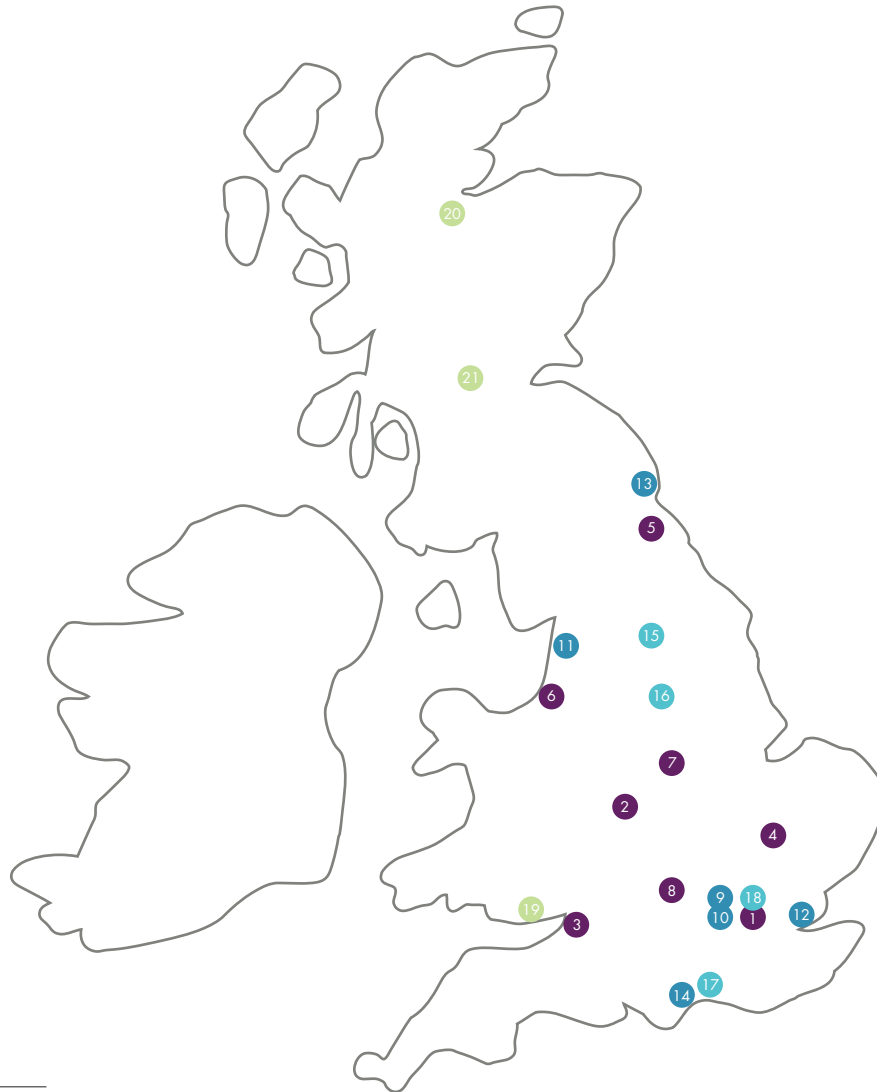


Figure S-2: Geographical location of selected HEIs<sup>2</sup>



**Group I - first 50%**

- 1 University College London
- 2 University of Birmingham
- 3 University of Bristol
- 4 University of Cambridge
- 5 University of Durham
- 6 University of Liverpool
- 7 University of Nottingham
- 8 University of Oxford

**Group II - next 30%**

- 9 Brunel University
- 10 Royal Holloway, University of London
- 11 University of Central Lancaster
- 12 University of Kent
- 13 University of Northumbria at Newcastle
- 14 University of Portsmouth

**Group III - final 20%**

- 15 Leeds Metropolitan
- 16 Sheffield Hallam University
- 17 University of Chichester
- 18 Royal College of Arts

**Other**

- 19 Cardiff University
- 20 University of the Highlands and Islands
- 21 University of Stirling

<sup>2</sup> The numbers given to HEIs in this figure were randomly assigned for the purposes of illustration only. They are not indicative of any ordering and are not related in any way to the manner in which data is presented throughout this report.

Impact case study and impact template lead author surveys were also conducted in order to ensure that the views of those who worked directly on these documents (and may not have been present during site visits) were captured. Two separate online surveys were run for each HEI participating in the evaluation. Institutions were asked to identify 'lead' authors for both the impact case studies and the impact templates within their submission, and these individuals were contacted by the evaluation team after the second site visit to complete the surveys.

Research user interviews were used to ascertain how research users engaged with REF 2014, and whether the process of providing evidence to researchers produced any particular benefits or challenges. Short, 20-minute telephone interviews took place using a semi-structured interview protocol. In total, 23 individuals and six organisational representatives were interviewed. Qualitative analysis was used to extract key themes according to the questions asked.

A cost analysis was employed in order to estimate the costs of preparing submissions for the impact assessment element of REF 2014. All HEIs were asked to complete a cost estimation worksheet that asked for estimates of costs and other resources relating to the preparation of the impact component of the REF submission in three main categories: type of costs, type of activity involved in the preparation, and proportion of costs estimated to be 'start-up' costs.

Finally, subsequent to data collection, we conducted a data-driven, 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' synthesis of the data collected, mapping the emerging key findings and observations to the research questions in the Invitation to Tender and to the data sources, and testing the strength of evidence for each key finding and observation.

### Results from the site visits

Overall, HEIs and those who work in them were broadly accepting of the concept of impact and the need to demonstrate it through the role of the HEI. Impact appears in some institutional missions and research impact strategies are already appearing at institutional, faculty or departmental levels. Many interviewees identified benefits in preparing impact submissions for REF 2014. For example, there was a view that it has contributed to a cultural change that promotes research which has greater impact outside academia.

Difficulties arose concerning the definition of 'impact'

for the purposes of the REF, and with the requirement that HEIs evidence their impact and articulate it using prescriptive templates and rules. These central elements of REF 2014 were challenges experienced with varying degrees of intensity within and between institutions. In addition, uncertainty about how assessment panels would weigh impact evidence led to the adoption of more 'risk averse' REF strategies. Taken together, at some HEIs these factors resulted in the exclusion of researchers and/or their impactful research from REF 2014 submissions.

Due to REF 2014 rules and eligibility criteria for demonstrating research impact, as well as the constraints institutions and individuals had to operate under, several HEIs struggled to operationalise the requirements to produce case studies. Consequently the impact element of REF 2014 was perceived to be a significant burden on the sector and on the few individuals who shouldered most of the work preparing impact submissions.

These broad conclusions are the results of analysis of interview data collected during the 21 HEI site visits. This report covers three main areas of analysis: HEI's wider strategic approach and reflections on preparations; specific operational difficulties experienced by HEIs in producing their impact submission; and anticipated changes to the wider culture within HEIs as a result of the impact part of the REF.

The following caveats and limitations apply to the data from this evidence stream:

- Contradictory points could be raised within an HEI and views are not necessarily representative of an institution.
- Different coding styles may have been used by the evaluation team.
- The semi-structured interview protocol meant that not all questions were asked at all interviews.

### Results from the impact surveys

Across our sample 1,997 impact case studies and 407 impact templates were submitted as part of REF 2014. For the impact case study author survey, 1,793 individuals were identified as 'lead case study authors' by the HEIs in our sample and invited to take part. The data was analysed using Excel and Nvivo software. The response rate across all 21 HEIs ranged from 36 per cent to 92 per cent, with an average response rate of 54 per cent. For the impact template survey, 456 individuals across the 21 HEIs were initially identified as lead authors and were invited to complete the impact

template survey. The response rate across all 21 HEIs ranged from 32 per cent to 100 per cent, with an average response rate of 57 per cent.

Respondents estimated that the median number of academics involved in producing an impact case study was three (interquartile range 2–4), and that a median of six academics were involved in producing an impact template (interquartile range 4–10). There was a median elapsed time for completing an impact case study of 18 months (interquartile range 12–24 months) and 17 months for impact templates (interquartile range 12–23 months). On average, respondents estimated that it took approximately 8.5 days and 14.5 days to produce an impact case study or impact template respectively. The time burden, as estimated by the lead author(s), was not shared evenly. On average, the lead author estimated that they accounted for 73.5 per cent of the total time invested in the impact case studies and 66.6 per cent of the time taken to produce an impact template. This suggests that the main bulk of the time spent on either document was concentrated in one individual.

Across both surveys, respondents identified a number of benefits, challenges, suggested improvements, good or notable practices within their institution, and aspects of funding policy that worked well. Both sets of respondents identified the main benefit as being their increased ability to identify and understand impact. Promotion and recognition, as well as reviewing and affirming relationships with research users/stakeholders were the next two most frequently cited benefits of producing the impact case studies.

In relation to challenges, both sets of respondents felt that the challenge of gathering evidence was most significant. This is consistent with one of the main findings from the overall evaluation, that the gathering of evidence was one of the most difficult and burdensome aspects of the impact submission (see Section 3.2 of the accompanying *Findings and observations* report). Other challenges shared across both impact documents were difficulties in understanding the assessment criteria, the format the documents had to be presented in, and the guidance provided by the HE funding bodies.

In light of these benefits and challenges, respondents made some suggestions for improvements that could take place within their own institution and to HE funding body policy. The most frequently mentioned improvement within institutions was to provide greater internal support to impact case study and impact template authors. This was consistent with the most frequently identified area of notable practice: coordination

and support. Respondents commented that having dedicated support from their institution, in the form of impact officers or funding, was very helpful in supporting the preparations. Respondents in both surveys identified the level of guidance and clarity of assessment criteria as key issues for the funding bodies to improve. There were requests for clearer and more concrete guidance as early in the process as possible, again supporting one of our key findings across the evaluation (see Section 5.1 in the *Findings and observations* report).

The following caveats and limitations apply to this evidence stream:

- The data were self-reported
- The sample of lead authors was identified by their HEI and may have been incomplete
- The accuracy of time estimations may vary
- Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions identified a series of ideas across responses.

#### Results from the research user interviews

Some 23 individual respondents and six organisational respondents were asked a range of questions covering individual/organisational awareness of REF 2014, the type of support provided, the benefits and challenges of providing evidence, resource estimations and any suggested improvements. Most individual respondents were not aware of the REF prior to being contacted by the case study author and asked to provide evidence for an impact case study. All organisational respondents, however, were well aware of the process. Just under half of the respondents provided additional data above and beyond a testimonial or letter of support. The median expended time estimated by individual research users was two hours (interquartile range 1–7.5 hours) and for organisations the estimates ranged from 30 minutes per request to ‘less than one day’. No individuals or organisations deemed the process of providing evidence to be overly onerous, which is in contrast to the perception of the academics we spoke with, many of whom believed the process of providing evidence was overly burdensome on research users and risked damaging relationships.

The individual and organisational research users did not always identify direct benefits to providing evidence for the REF, but did identify indirect benefits such as crystallising the value of research to the individual/organisation and relationship building. Challenges included collecting commercial or sales data and knowing how much time should be invested. Organisational respondents

Table S-1: Summary of key costs indicators

	Best estimate <sup>3</sup>	Comparable estimate <sup>4</sup>
Cost per impact case study	£7,500	£7,000
Cost per impact template	£4,500	£4,000
Total estimated costs for the impact assessment element of REF 2014	£55m	£51m
Total estimated costs for preparing REF 2014	£121m	£115m
Transaction costs (i.e. total costs divided by estimated quality-related funding until next REF)	1.4%	1.4%

also noted that the problem of attribution and contribution was difficult when thinking about individual research projects, particularly when many projects may feed into an organisation's wider evidence base.

The following caveats and limitations apply to this evidence stream:

- Not all individuals interpreted all questions in the same way
- There was a small sample size relative to the entire pool of research users
- There was a sampling bias.

#### Results from the cost analysis

The key results from our cost analysis are summarised in Table S-1, while Figure S-3 shows the cost per impact case study and impact template by HEI.

When the drivers of these costs were analysed across the case studies, we saw a great level of variance among institutions. However, broadly speaking, writing impact case studies and training staff about impact took up the most time for most institutions. Not all HEIs provided information on start-up costs and, of those that did, seven reported that there were no start-up costs and the remaining institutions estimated start-up costs at 2 per cent to 23 per cent of total costs. Extrapolating these costs across the sample, the total estimated start-up costs were about £6m or 5 per cent of the estimated total costs across all 18 HEIs. That said, it is interesting to note that 28 per cent of time allocated to REF was on training that, arguably, would not need to be repeated

in subsequent rounds of the REF, or at least not to the same extent, assuming many of the same people would contribute to both exercises.

The following caveats and limitations apply to this evidence stream:

- Exact data relating to time spent were not available and we requested indicative estimates from HEIs.
- The data do not provide a precise estimate.

#### Key findings

As discussed in the *Findings and observations* report, twelve key findings emerged from our synthesis and analysis of the data collected in this evaluation:

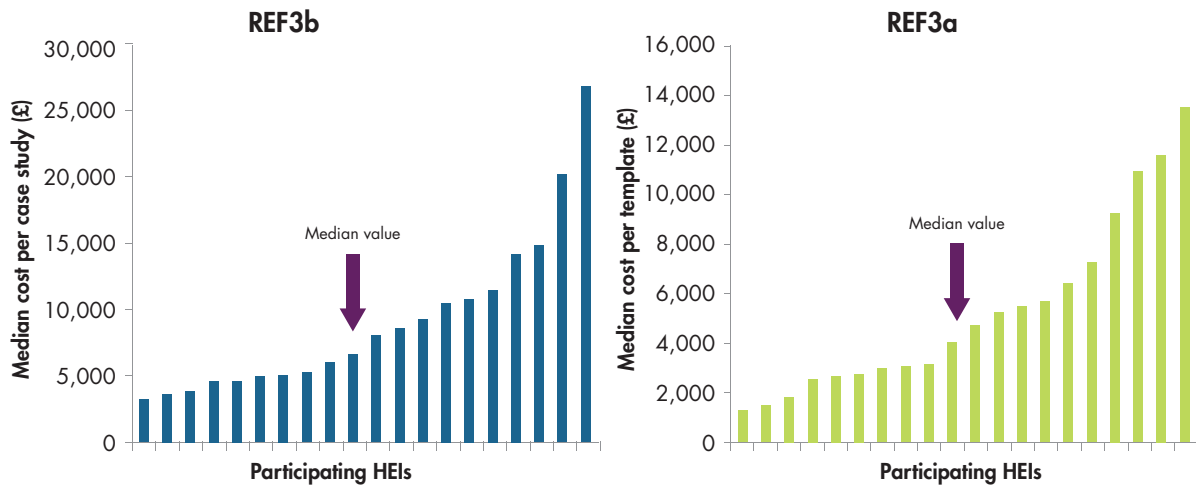
- Participants saw a number of benefits from the increased focus on the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014, along with other policies (such as Research Council UK's 'Pathways to Impact') and the broader 'impact agenda'.
- The assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 was a significant new burden for HEIs.
- HEIs were able to identify and articulate their impact as part of REF 2014. However, views on guidance from the HE funding bodies for demonstrating research impact ranged widely, from full support to great concern.
- The biggest challenges (and burdens) in preparing impact case studies (REF3b) were the requirement to 'evidence' impact and the need to develop an understanding of the concept of impact.
- HEIs perceived that the exercise had put an undue

<sup>3</sup> We have rounded our 'best estimate' up to the nearest £500 so as not to present a spurious degree of accuracy in the cost analysis. The actual median cost per impact case study was £7,360 (range: £3,216–£26,890; interquartile range: £4,899–£11,011) and the median cost per impact template £4,368 (range: £1,318–£13,523; interquartile range: £2,745–£6,631)

<sup>4</sup> This is with on-costs at 16 per cent as assumed in the RAE 2008 Accountability Review. This is examined further in the one-way sensitivity analysis reported below.



Figure S-3: Estimated costs of producing impact case studies and impact templates



burden on research users, although this was not their experience.

- There was uncertainty about how panels will assess impact and this has led to unease in the sector.
- As a result of the impact agenda and changing culture, HEIs are changing their practices.
- There is evidence that there was as much diversity of views and attitudes towards the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 within HEIs as there was between them.
- The impact case studies (REF3b) submitted may

not be representative of the actual impact of research occurring within HEIs.

- There is a concern that the impact agenda may begin to undermine ‘blue skies’ research.
- There is a strong desire among HEIs for the HE funding councils to indicate as soon as possible whether and how impact will be assessed for the next round of the REF.
- There were examples of notable practices that HEIs identified as supporting the preparation of the impact element of REF 2014 submissions.



## Acknowledgements

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### **Authors' contributions**

On this study JG was the project leader and CM the project manager. MMJ and MF were senior researchers and SG, SCC and MLH junior researchers on the project. The analysis of the site visit data was led by MF and CM. The development and analysis of the survey was conducted by CM and MLH. The research user interviews was led and analysed by MMJ and SCC. The analysis of the cost estimations was undertaken by JG and SG. During the course of the project, JG was appointed to and took up the position of Director of the Policy Institute at King's and Professor of Public Policy at King's College London. He continued to lead the project through his ongoing affiliation with RAND Europe as an honorary senior research fellow.



## Abbreviations

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<b>FTE</b>	Full-Time Equivalent
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEFCE</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for England
<b>HEFCW</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>QR</b>	Quality-Related
<b>RAE</b>	Research Assessment Exercise
<b>RCUK</b>	Research Councils UK
<b>REF</b>	Research Excellence Framework
<b>REF3a</b>	REF 2014 section for the impact template document
<b>REF3b</b>	REF 2014 section for the impact case study document
<b>R&amp;D</b>	Research and Development
<b>SFC</b>	Scottish Funding Council
<b>UOA</b>	Unit of Assessment



# Chapter 1 Introduction

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This report presents the methodological approach for and underlying evidence from an evaluation of the institutional submission process for the impact assessment element of REF 2014, commissioned by HEFCE, HEFCW and SFC in March 2013. The evaluation is presented in two related documents: the *Findings and observations* report and the *Approach and evidence* report. The *Findings and observations* report is aimed at key decision-makers within government, higher education institutions and elsewhere and presents the 12 key findings from the evaluation, including an Executive Summary. The report and its Executive Summary are intended to be read as standalone documents. This *Approach and evidence* report is a longer, more detailed account of the evaluation structured around the methodological tasks that we adopted throughout the evaluation. It is aimed at those who wish to better understand the underlying evidence for our key findings and observations, and how we collected and collated that evidence, and should be read alongside the *Findings and observations* report. It should be noted that the reports from this evaluation were finalised in June 2014 but publication was delayed until the results and feedback of REF 2014 had been published, in order to avoid affecting panel decisionmaking.

## 1.1. Background to the Research Excellence Framework 2014

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs).<sup>5</sup> It replaces the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has occurred on a (near) quinquennial basis since 1986. The RAE assessed research excellence in universities by the quality of

research outputs and other measures of the research environment, including research students, income and evidence of esteem (RAE 2005). The REF also assesses research excellence, but on the basis of three main criteria: the *quality* of research outputs, the *wider impact* of research and the *vitality* of the research environment (REF 2011b).

The outcomes of REF 2014 will be published in December 2014. The REF is being undertaken by the four UK higher education (HE) funding bodies,<sup>6</sup> but is being managed by the REF team based at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives from the UK HE funding bodies.

The REF has three main purposes:

- To inform the selective allocation of funding body research funding to HEIs, with effect from the academic year 2015–16.
- To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment.
- To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks.

The REF is a process of expert review. HEIs are invited to make submissions to 36 different units of assessment (UOAs) across four main panels (A, B, C and D) and each submission is assessed by an expert sub-panel, working under the guidance of the four main panels.<sup>7</sup> Sub-panels apply a set of generic assessment criteria to produce an overall quality profile for each submission (REF 2011b).

<sup>5</sup> A higher education institution is a university or higher education college. All HEIs across the UK are eligible to submit to the REF, which leads to funding allocation. Submissions are organised by subject areas, defined as Units of Assessment.

<sup>6</sup> The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> A full list of the panels and UOAs can be found in Appendix A.

The allocation of research funding based on non-academic impact is relatively new, with the REF being the first example of its application across a national research system (Morgan Jones & Grant 2013). Following a pilot exercise (Technopolis 2010), the HE funding bodies in the UK concluded that peer review of research impact case studies was a workable approach. HEIs were expected to submit examples of impact that occurred between 2008 and 2013, as impact case studies (REF3b), and a more general strategy of how the unit of submission were facilitating impact and would continue to do so, as an impact template (REF3a).<sup>8</sup>

The weighting for the impact assessment part of the REF is 20 per cent of the total assessment in 2014. Documentation from the HE funding bodies has stated ‘a weighting of 25 per cent for impact would give due recognition to the economic and social benefits of excellent research. However, given that the impact assessment in the 2014 REF will still be developmental, the weighting of impact in the first exercise will be reduced to 20 per cent, with the intention of increasing this in subsequent exercises’ (REF 2011a). Indeed some have already begun to call for impact weighting to be increased to 25 per cent in the future (Witty 2013). The specific requirements of the impact submission documents are outlined below.

### 1.1.1. Requirements of impact case studies

The submission of case studies for the REF 2014 exercise required institutions to select their strongest examples of impact, which were underpinned by the submitted unit’s ‘excellent research’, and describe the evidence of this impact. Excellent research is defined as that which is at least equivalent to ‘two star’ quality. The impact must have occurred between 1 January 2008 and 31 July 2013 and the underpinning research must have been conducted between 1 January 1993 and 31 December 2013. Institutions were required to submit impact case studies to the appropriate UOAs and each case study was assessed for reach and significance criteria.

The case study template was made up of five sections. The weighting attributed to each section was not stated, although each did have varying indicative word limits. The first section consisted of a 100-word summary intended to briefly outline the impact described in

the case study. Section two asked for an outline of the underpinning research in 500 words, including what research was undertaken, when and by whom. The third section required a maximum of six references to the research to be listed, as well as an indication of the quality of the research. This latter component differed by panel. The fourth section asked for details of the impact to be described in 750 words. This was the largest section in the case study, requiring HEIs to provide a clear explanation of the process by which the underpinning research led to the impact, details of the beneficiaries and the nature of the impact, evidence of the extent of the impact described and dates of when the impact occurred. Finally, section five required HEIs to list sources to corroborate the claimed impact (of which a maximum of ten could be provided). This could include contact details of individuals who could corroborate impact claims, external sources such as reports, web links or documents, or testimonials provided to the HEI by research users/beneficiaries.

### 1.1.2. Requirements of impact templates

The impact template requirements for the REF 2014 exercise consisted of submitting a template that described the ‘submitted unit’s approach during the assessment period (1 January 2008 to 31 July 2013) to supporting and enabling impact from research conducted within the unit’ (REF 2011a). According to the REF 2014 guidance, this information is intended to enable a more ‘holistic and contextualised’ assessment of impact than would be possible through case studies alone, including any particular circumstances that may have constrained a submitted unit’s selection of case studies (REF 2011a). If a submitting unit did not have an impact strategy in place before the assessment period, it was able to describe its approach during the impact period. Impact templates were also judged according to reach and significance criteria, in terms of the extent to which the submitting unit’s approach described in the template is conducive to achieving reach and significance impacts.

The impact template was made up of four sections. The guidance for each section differed slightly by panel, although the broad requirements were the same. The requirements of what to describe in each section are summarised below:

<sup>8</sup> In this document we will refer first to impact case studies (REF3b) and then to impact templates (REF3a). This is because impact case studies formed the main part of the assessment with a weighting of 80 per cent within the impact part of the REF, versus 20 per cent for impact templates. Due to this greater emphasis, the majority of the discussions and views received during the evaluation related to the impact case studies.



- Context: the main non-academic user groups and beneficiaries of the unit's research, as well as the main types of impact relevant to the unit's research.
- Approach to impact: the unit's approach and infrastructural mechanisms to support staff to achieve impact.
- Strategy and plans: clearly stated goals and plans for maximising potential impact from current and future research.
- Relationship to the case studies: the relationship between the selected case studies and the unit's approach to achieving impact.

## 1.2. This evaluation

The aims of this evaluation are set out in Box 1-1. It should be stressed from the outset that this study does not evaluate how panels assessed impact, nor does it look at the other elements of the REF (that is the preparation, submission and assessment of outputs and environment statements). A separate evaluation has been commissioned to review the assessment of impact by the panels.

### Box 1-1: Aims of the evaluation

- Identify and describe the perceived challenges and benefits to HEIs and research users in preparing impact submissions to REF 2014
- Identify and describe the intended and unintended consequences of assessing research impact for HEIs and disciplines
- Formulate sound, evidence-based conclusions and recommendations to improve the process for preparing and submitting impact assessments for future REF exercises
- Ensure that innovative and good practices in research impact assessment as used during the submission process are identified and highlighted to HEIs, research users, HE funding councils and other stakeholders

## 1.3. Methodology overview

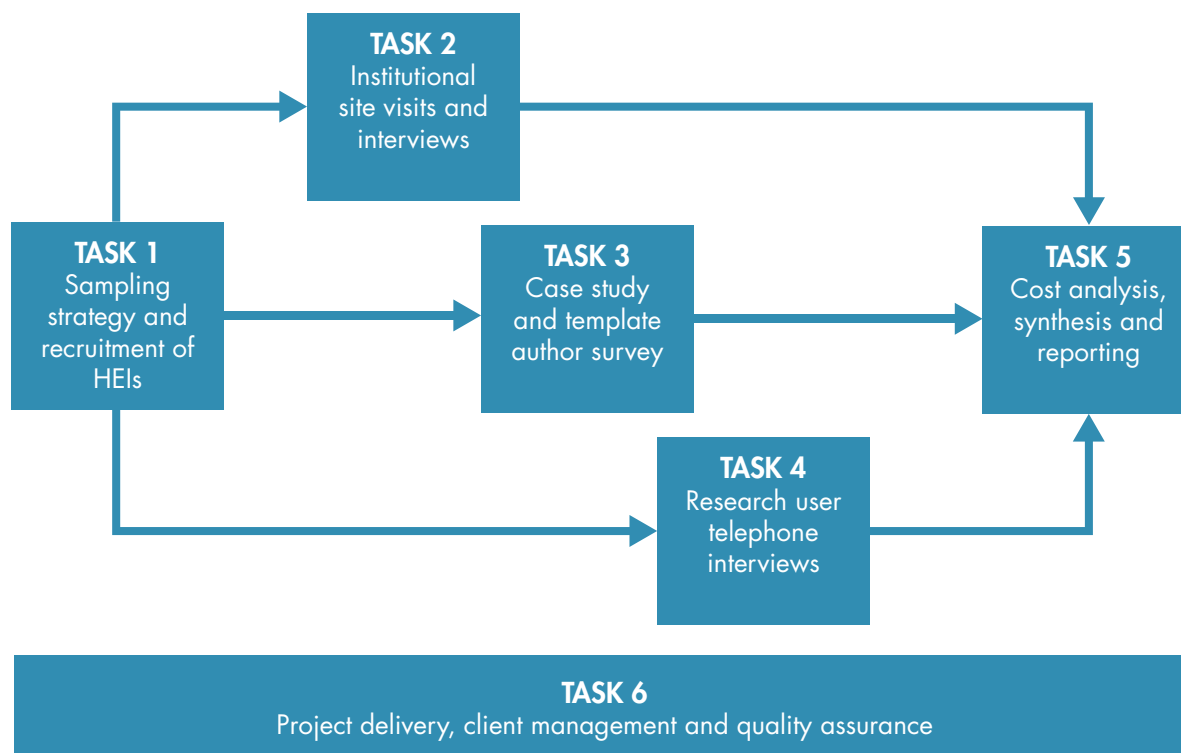
Our overall approach to this evaluation is summarised in Figure 1-1. We collected data from a sample of three stakeholder groups: those associated with the leadership and administration of the impact assessment element of REF 2014 in HEIs; those who led

the development of impact case studies and impact templates (i.e. research academics); and research users (i.e. the beneficiaries of research). We used different data collection approaches – face-to-face and telephone interviews with key informants and an online survey – and conducted systematic, structured coding and analysis across data sources by stakeholder group, institution type and respondent characteristics. Prior to data collection, we mapped the research questions specified in the Invitation to Tender document to the data sources in order to ensure all research questions would be addressed by our methodology. After data collection, we conducted both a data driven 'bottom up' and a 'top-down' synthesis of the data collected, mapping the emerging findings and observations to the Invitation to Tender research questions and to the data sources, and we tested the strength of evidence for each key finding and observation. Each of the main components of the methodology are described in further detail below, with additional detail provided in subsequent chapters of this report.

### 1.3.1. Sampling strategy and recruitment of HEIs

To arrive at the sample of HEIs in England that would be invited to participate in the evaluation, we selected 18 HEIs from the population of 123 who indicated their 'intention to submit' to REF 2014 (thus the sample represented about 15 per cent of HEIs in England). We began by creating three groups of HEIs based on the number of Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) that the HEIs were planning to submit to REF 2014. As HEIs were required to submit approximately one impact case study per ten submitted FTEs (with a minimum of two case studies for up to 14.99 FTEs per UOA), this provided a good proxy for HEI activity in preparing for the impact element of REF 2014. In order to create these three groups, we plotted the distribution of FTEs by institution and divided them into the three groups (Figure 1-2). The first group is made up of the 16 HEIs in England that will account for 50 per cent of all submissions (Group I); the second is the 28 HEIs that will account for the next 30 per cent of submissions (Group II), and the third is the 79 HEIs that will account for the remaining 20 per cent of submissions (Group III). We deliberately wanted to oversample larger institutions, but also ensure that we had representation from the smaller ones. We therefore randomly selected eight HEIs from Group I, six from Group II and four from Group III, as listed in Appendix B.

Figure 1-1: Project schema



To ensure balanced representation, we then assessed this initial selection of HEIs in England against a series of pre-defined quotas. These were:

- At least one HEI from each of the nine regions used by HEFCE (North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England, London, South East, and the South West).
- One monotechnic HEI, defined as submitting in only one UOA.
- No institutions from the same location outside London or more than two institutions from the University of London within a group.

The 18 HEIs that we originally selected in the first ‘draw’ are listed in Appendix A. Of these we had to ‘redraw’ seven, as also detailed in the table in the Appendix. In the ‘redrawn’ selection we covered all nine regions, had one monotechnic HEI and avoided co-location of institutions. This resulted in a sample of HEIs that

covered approximately 35 per cent of FTEs, and therefore impact case studies, that HEIs planned to submit to REF 2014.<sup>9</sup>

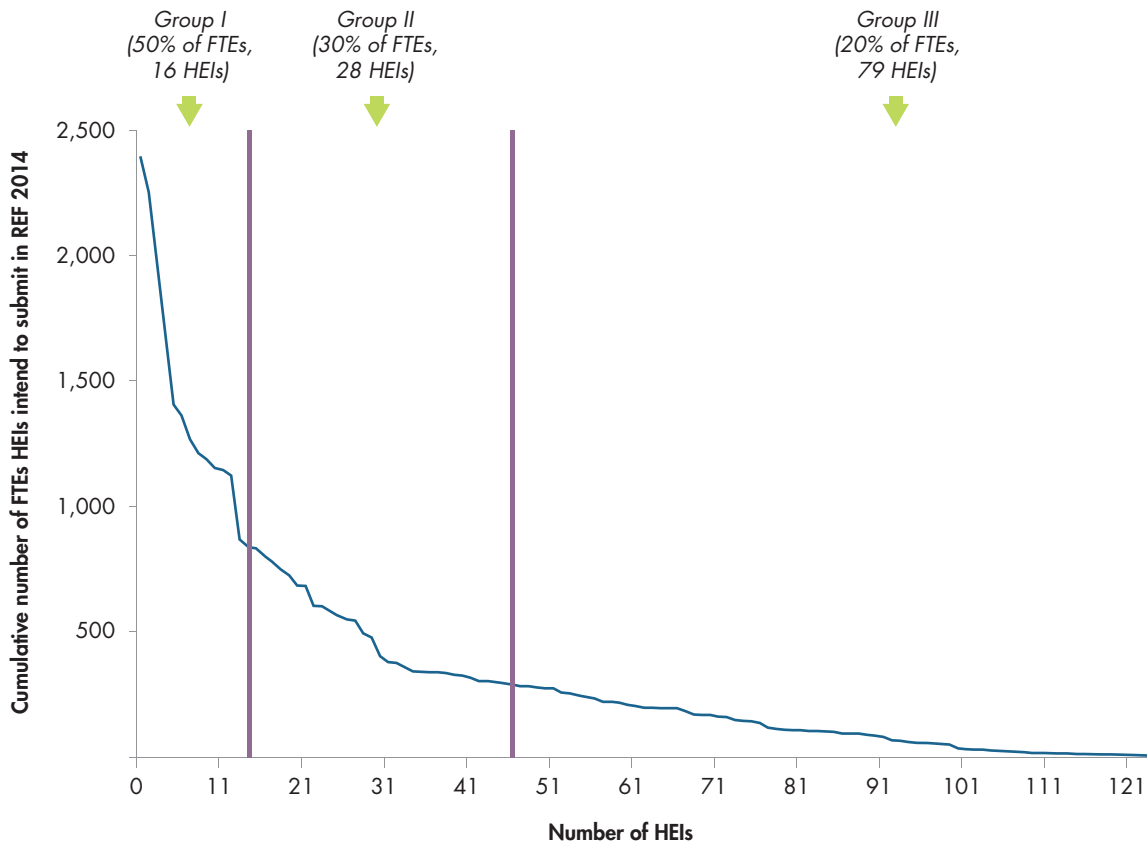
Before finalising the sample, we checked the representativeness of these 18 selected HEIs by panel. Figure 1-3 shows that we had a broadly representative sample across the four main panels. Our representative selection resulted in a slight oversample for Panels A and B and a slight undersample in C and D, but this was within the 15 percentage point boundary we had set ourselves.

The selection was supplemented by one HEI from Wales (Cardiff University, nominated by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales) and two from Scotland (the University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of Stirling, both nominated by Scottish Funding Council in consultation with Universities Scotland and researchers), resulting in a total sample of 21 HEIs.<sup>10</sup> These institutions are spread across the UK, as shown in Figure 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Analysis after the submission data showed that our sample covered 29 per cent of FTEs/impact case studies that HEIs submitted to REF 2014.

<sup>10</sup> There was no representation of HEIs from Northern Ireland as the Department for Learning and Employment, Northern Ireland, declined to participate in this evaluation.

**Figure 1-2: Distribution of the intended number of FTEs to be submitted to REF 2014 by HEIs, split into three sampling groups**



**Figure 1-3: Representativeness of the sample by main panels**

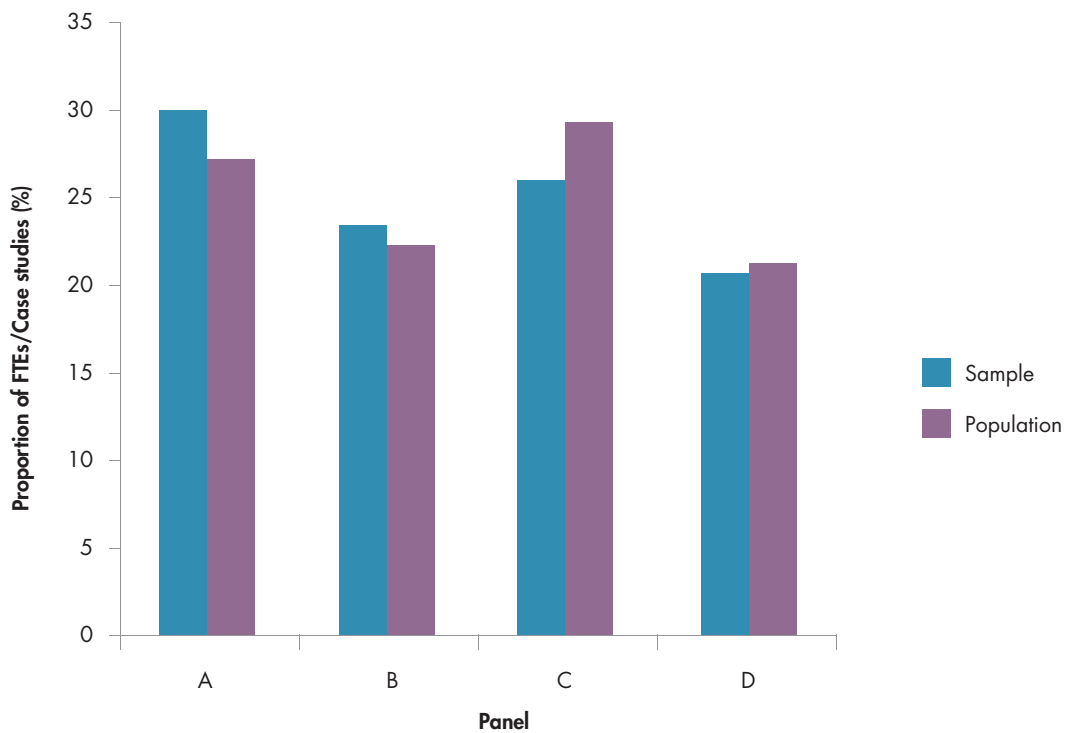
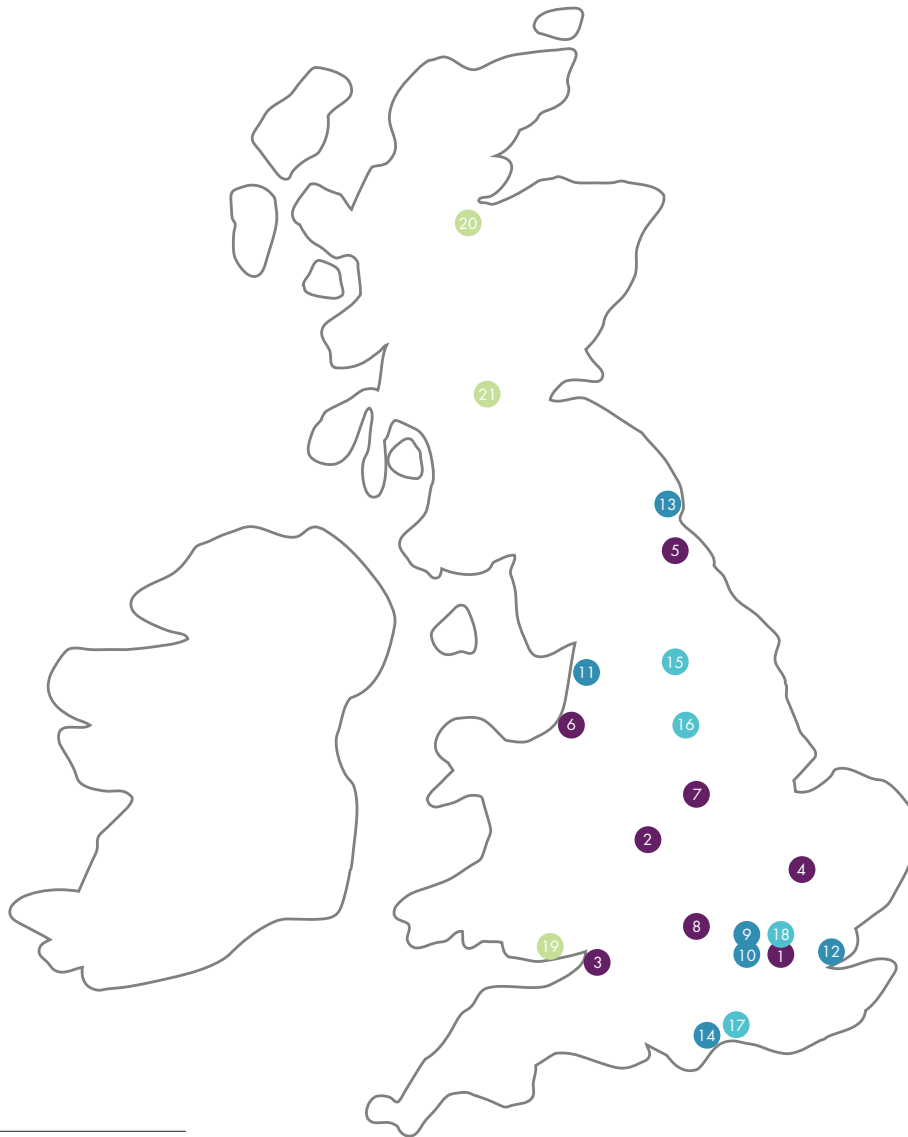


Figure 1-4: Geographical location of selected HEIs<sup>11</sup>



**Group I - first 50%**

- 1 University College London
- 2 University of Birmingham
- 3 University of Bristol
- 4 University of Cambridge
- 5 University of Durham
- 6 University of Liverpool
- 7 University of Nottingham
- 8 University of Oxford

**Group II - next 30%**

- 9 Brunel University
- 10 Royal Holloway, University of London
- 11 University of Central Lancaster
- 12 University of Kent
- 13 University of Northumbria at Newcastle
- 14 University of Portsmouth

**Group III - final 20%**

- 15 Leeds Metropolitan
- 16 Sheffield Hallam University
- 17 University of Chichester
- 18 Royal College of Arts

**Other**

- 19 Cardiff University
- 20 University of the Highlands and Islands
- 21 University of Stirling

<sup>11</sup> The numbers given to HEIs in this figure were randomly assigned for the purposes of illustration only. They are not indicative of any ordering and are not related in any way to the manner in which data is presented throughout this report.

**Table 1-1: Response rate to the impact case study and impact template surveys**

Type of survey	Number of individuals invited to complete the survey	Number of respondents	Response rate
Impact case study (REF3b)	1,793	964	55%
Impact template (REF3a)	456	259	57%

### 1.3.2. Site visits

We conducted site visits in order to gain qualitative insights into the process that HEIs went through in preparing submissions and to understand the benefits, challenges and consequences they perceived. We conducted two site visits to each of the 21 HEIs in our sample. The first visit occurred between June 2013 and September 2013 and consisted of a one to two hour meeting with senior administrators and/or leaders within the HEI. We discussed the background to the study, the overall approach to the evaluation, requirements of participation from the HEI and answered any questions they had. We also gained an initial sense of some of the challenges and benefits they were experiencing. These insights helped to inform the development of our interview and survey protocols.

The second site visit occurred between December 2013 and February 2014 and was the main data collection visit. During these visits two researchers from the evaluation team spent from half to one day at the institution conducting semi-structured interviews with a range of individuals involved in leading and supporting the impact submission for the HEI. The individuals included senior leaders (Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Department Heads, etc.), senior administrators (REF Coordinators), UOA leads within departments, and impact support officers. Each interview was 1 to 2 hours and there were usually between 3 and 8 people per interview group.

In total, we held 126 interviews and met with 327 individuals during these second site visits. Data were collected by taking written and typed notes, as well as audio recordings of each meeting. Verbatim transcripts were not made, but detailed notes were developed and reviewed. These were then coded using QSR NVivo 10 International software. The research team developed

an NVivo code book for the analysis of unstructured qualitative data based on interview answers (see Section 2.2.3 for a detailed description of the NVivo analysis and use of the code book). The site visit NVivo code book included descriptive nodes for each participating HEI and UOA, as well as generic nodes that covered interviewee type and either positive or negative views about the topics covered. Thematic codes were used to code the qualitative data itself and were based around the interview protocol, for example descriptions of benefits or challenges.

Each set of interview data from a site visit was coded by a member of that site visit team. There were also regular meetings among the coders to ensure consistency in coding practice and to discuss any additions or necessary changes to the code book. Once all site visit interview notes had been coded, a matrix analysis of intersecting codes was performed to test the emerging key findings and observations and ensure coverage of the research questions set out in HEFCE's Invitation to Tender. Further detail about the analysis and the results can be found in Chapter 2.

### 1.3.3. Impact case study (REF3b) and impact template (REF3a) lead author surveys

The purpose of the impact case study and impact template lead author surveys was to ensure that the views of those who worked directly on the impact case studies and impact templates (and who may not have been present during site visits) were captured.<sup>12</sup> Two separate online surveys were run for each HEI participating in the evaluation. Institutions were asked to identify 'lead' authors for both the impact case studies and the impact templates within their submission and these individuals were contacted by the evaluation team after the second site visit to complete the surveys. There was no involvement from HE funding bodies to prompt survey

<sup>12</sup> While in some cases this may lead to some respondents contributing both to the survey and the interviews, and thus a risk of bias in the overall sample and through the triangulation of data sources, this has minimal impact on the analysis as the role of data from each method was different. Response data were extracted from the survey, whereas site visits were used to draw out more nuanced qualitative views and information.

completion. Reminders were sent by the evaluation team, and in some cases by institutions, over the course of four weeks. The response rates are shown in Table 1-1.

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis produced descriptive statistics and qualitative narratives based on the same NVivo coding approach used for the site visits (see Section 1.3.2). Further detail about the analysis and findings can be found in Chapter 3.

### 1.3.4. Research user perspectives

The purpose of the research user interviews was to ascertain how research users engaged with REF 2014, and whether the process of providing evidence to researchers produced any particular benefits or challenges. Short, 20-minute telephone interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. We sought to speak with both individual research users who had provided evidence in the form of a testimonial to an impact case study, as well as representatives of those organisations that had provided ten or more testimonials for impact case studies from within our sample of HEIs. An initial sample of research users from across the 21 HEIs was produced and we sought permission from all HEIs to contact them. Four HEIs did not want any of their contacts to be involved in this process (primarily to avoid placing a further burden on research users) and a further five HEIs asked us to remove certain individuals from the sample, leaving a total of 83 individuals.<sup>13</sup> Reasons for requesting removal included research users not being directly involved in the REF process (rather they had already provided statements of corroboration before they were required for the REF process), ill health, or that the HEIs did not want to place an additional burden on research users. Within our final sample, 57 individuals and 9 organisations were invited to be interviewed and 23 individuals and 6 organisational representatives were eventually interviewed. Qualitative analysis was used to extract key themes according to the questions asked. The results can be found in Chapter 4.

### 1.3.5. Cost analysis

The purpose of the benefit and burden analysis was to estimate the costs of preparing submissions for the impact assessment element of REF 2014. All HEIs were

asked to complete a cost estimation worksheet that asked for estimates of costs and other resources used to prepare the impact component of the REF submission in the categories shown in Box 1-2.

#### Box 1-2: Summary of information collected in cost estimation worksheets

##### Type of cost

- Labour – number of days by whom (academic/academic-related), or grade in the case of new posts
- Direct costs – such as for IT systems

##### Type of activity

- Writing impact case studies
- Evidencing impact case studies
- Reviewing impact case studies
- Other support for the development of impact case studies
- Developing impact templates
- Reviewing impact templates
- Developing impact case study strategy for the institution
- Developing impact case study strategy for a Unit of Assessment
- Selecting impact case studies
- Managing the overall process of preparing the impact submission
- Other time spent managing the impact submission
- Training

##### Proportion estimated to be start-up costs

From these data we were able to generate four indicators and estimates of cost:

- Median cost per impact case study
- Median cost per impact template
- Total costs of REF 2014
- Transaction costs (i.e. total costs divided by estimated QR funding).

<sup>13</sup> We discussed with HEFCE whether this self-censorship was acceptable, given that the HEIs had signed up to the evaluation knowing that we would be undertaking interviews with research users. We collectively agreed that this is an observation in itself and indicated the sensitivities in the HE sector about research user engagement in the REF, and therefore we did not challenge the HEIs' decision to withdraw from this element of the study.

Further detail on the analysis and findings can be found in Chapter 5.

### 1.3.6. Synthesis within and across tasks

The purpose of this final task was to provide a synthesis of the key themes that emerge from a ‘top-down’ perspective on the data and to triangulate across all evidence streams. We were conscious as we proceeded through the evaluation that there was a vast amount of data being collected, particularly through the site visits. We needed to ensure that we captured all relevant information and themes which would emerge from the analysis of that data, but in a way that would give coherence to the main messages. We therefore adopted a ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach to the final synthesis.

The ‘top-down’ approach began by asking each member of the evaluation team to independently reflect on five key messages from each of the site visits they conducted. These were captured immediately after each site visit and sent to a member of the team who was not involved in the site visits for analysis. The themes were qualitatively analysed and used to generate a series of ‘top-down’ messages from the data.

The ‘bottom-up’ approach was developed through the analysis of the data from each evidence stream. Qualitative data from the site visits and surveys was analysed in NVivo (see Section 2.2.3.) and key themes emerged from that analysis according to the nodes and a master code book.

Once each kind of analytical approach was completed, we triangulated between the different sources of data and analysis to ensure that the ‘top-down’ messages

were supported by data and merited inclusion and that any themes that emerged from the ‘bottom-up’ analysis were also captured as a key observation. This resulted in a set of twelve key findings and observations, summarised in the accompanying *Findings and observations* report (Manville et al. 2015). Further detail on the analysis and findings can be found in Chapter 6.

## 1.4. Structure of the report

This report is organised around the four methodologies that were used during the evaluation. Chapter 2 presents the data and analysis from the site visits; Chapter 3 presents the surveys of lead authors for the impact elements of the submission (impact case studies and impact templates); Chapter 4 presents the analysis of interviews with research users; and Chapter 5 examines the cost estimation of the impact element of the submission process. Within each chapter background, approach and results are discussed. Chapter 6 provides the approach by which we synthesised the various methodologies and a discussion of our key findings.

As discussed above, the evaluation is presented in two related documents: the *Findings and observations* report and this *Approach and evidence* report. The *Findings and observations* report is aimed at key decisionmakers within government, HEIs and elsewhere and presents the 12 key findings from the evaluation. This report provides a more detailed account of the evaluation and is aimed at those people who wish to better understand the underlying evidence of our key findings, and how we collected and collated that evidence.





## Chapter 2 Results from the site visits

### 2.1. Background

We conducted site visit interviews with individuals and groups responsible for the impact submission at each institution in our sample. The purpose was to gain an insight into the processes HEIs underwent to develop the impact element of their REF 2014 submission and to understand the benefits, challenges and consequences experienced across each institution. Interviewees at each HEI were also asked for their suggested improvements to the process at an institution and policy level, and to identify areas that they thought worked well within REF 2014.

This chapter sets out the methodology for conducting the interviews and the accompanying data analysis. We then describe the findings from the site visits in detail, addressing benefits, challenges and consequences through the different stages of the process of preparing for the impact assessment.

### 2.2. Approach

#### 2.2.1. Preparation and initial site visits

As discussed in Section 1.3, the study used a sample of 21 institutions, and two site visits were conducted at each of these between June 2013 and February 2014. First, between June 2013 and September 2013, an initial visit was conducted to meet with senior representatives from each institution and to discuss the following: the purpose of the evaluation; the logistics of the evaluation; the proposed methodological approach; and the initial observations of the interviewees. After the site visit, the evaluation team worked with the individual HEIs to develop an agenda for a second site visit, where we would speak with those associated with the leadership, administration and preparation of the impact component of REF 2014.

#### 2.2.2. Interviews at the second site visits

A second round of site visits was conducted between December 2013 and February 2014 by a pair of researchers from the evaluation team. Interviews were conducted with individuals or groups of people selected by the HEI. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) was used to guide the discussion and particular areas of the protocol were focused upon with different groups to ensure all elements were covered at each HEI. At each institution the following topics were covered:

- HEI strategy and process
- Benefits
- Challenges
- Rules and guidance
- Evidence gathering
- Impact template (REF3a)
- Attitude to impact and wider HEI culture.

Across the 21 institutions we spoke to 327 interviewees. Some had a central leadership role in the HEI whereas others were responsible for specific schools, faculties or UOAs. The distribution of our sample across the panels was relatively even (Table 2-1), and we spoke to individuals from each of the 36 UOAs, with the exception of Anthropology and Development Studies (UOA24).

**Table 2-1: Distribution of interviewees across the four main panels**

Panel	% of interviewees associated with a specific panel <sup>14</sup>
A	22
B	29
C	22
D	26

<sup>14</sup> Due to rounding the total in this column adds to 99 per cent.

### 2.2.3. Analysis

Following the site visit, we used notes and audio recordings taken to write up memos from each interview. These were not verbatim transcripts but detailed descriptions ranging from 1,226 to 5,457 words. These were reviewed, and where appropriate revised, by the second researcher on the visit and uploaded into QRS NVivo 10 software, which was used for the analysis. A total of 126 memos were produced.

In order to conduct the analysis, we developed a code book and assigned recorded statements to different descriptive and analytical categories.<sup>15</sup> The site visit NVivo code book included node sets related to the following:

- Institutional processes associated with preparing for impact assessment (HEI strategy and culture, funding council rules and guidance, evidence collection, template preparation, panel behaviour).
- Research questions specified in the HE funding councils' Invitation to Tender (benefits, consequences, challenges, good practice, improvements).
- Generic nodes for capturing interviewee types (central and faculty staff), HEIs and UOAs, and also positive and negative views expressed by interviewees.

The nodes contained sub-themes within them, and in total there were 48 nodes in the code book (for further detail see Appendix D). Statements within the interview notes were qualitatively reviewed and coded to as many nodes as applicable. For example, a statement that referred both to the challenges an interviewee faced in producing the impact document and how institutional support helped overcome the challenges in some way would have been coded to nodes related both to challenges and institutional support. A total of 12,567 phrases were coded in NVivo.

Once all the memos were coded, coding matrices were run across the NVivo data, pulling out comments coded to two nodes to provide a subset of data to review. For example, comments related to benefits might have been crossed with all data coded to a particular panel to see if there were similarities or differences across panels in the types of benefits perceived by interviewees. In addition, specific topics were identified for text searches. In order to examine the impact on blue skies research, for example, the following terms were searched for: 'blue

skies, applied, research agenda, pure, distort, skew, undermine, danger, consultants, warp, shame, curiosity, disenfranchise, shape the discipline, protect'.

In addition to this detailed analysis of the site visit memos, immediately after a site visit each researcher who attended independently identified five key themes from the visit. Once all visits were completed the common themes were clustered and the data captured by NVivo were then tested against the key themes. This process of synthesis and triangulation across the data is described in further detail in Chapter 6.

### 2.2.4. Confidentiality

To protect the anonymity of our interviewees and ensure confidentiality, data are presented at an HEI level and we have attempted to remove all identifiable information about HEIs or individuals. This includes changing references to institution-specific structures or individuals, such as schools, faculties or Vice Chancellors, into a standardised format (institution-specific structures were standardised to 'departments' in all cases, and senior or central staff are referred to as a group). We also recognise that HEIs do not have one perspective on the issues discussed and therefore the data cannot be quantified at this level. The advantage of the site visit analysis is that it provides rich detail and nuanced understanding of the different issues from an array of perspectives within each institution. Therefore, throughout our analysis, the quantitative data is taken predominantly from the surveys (see Chapter 3) and supported by qualitative information obtained during the site visits.

## 2.3. Results

Overall, individuals at the 21 HEIs in our evaluation were broadly accepting of the concept of, and need to demonstrate, impact. Impact appears in some institutional missions and research impact strategies are already appearing at institutional, faculty or departmental levels. Many interviewees identified benefits in preparing impact submissions for REF 2014, and there was a widespread view that this has contributed to cultural change in favour of impactful research across the sector.

Difficulties arose with the definition of 'impact' for the purposes of the REF, and with the requirement that HEIs provide evidence of their impact and articulate

<sup>15</sup> This approach follows an analytical process such as that outlined in Bazeley & Jackson (2013).

it using REF-specific templates and rules. These central elements of REF 2014 were challenges experienced with varying degrees of intensity within and between institutions. In addition, uncertainty about how assessment panels would weigh impact evidence led to the adoption of more ‘risk averse’ REF strategies within many institutions. At some HEIs, these factors, including both risk averse strategies and the rules regarding the number of case studies that had to be submitted, resulted in the exclusion of researchers and/or their impactful research from REF 2014 submissions. This is just one example of how some HEIs struggled to produce case studies due to the REF 2014 rules and eligibility criteria for demonstrating research impact. Consequently the impact element of REF 2014 was perceived to be a significant burden on the sector and on the few individuals who shouldered most of the work preparing impact submissions.

The following sections provide the supporting evidence for these conclusions and cover three main areas of analysis: HEIs’ wider strategic approach and reflections on preparations; specific operational difficulties experienced by HEIs in producing their impact submission; and anticipated changes to the wider culture within HEIs as a result of the impact element of the REF.

### 2.3.1. HEI strategy

In this section we outline findings in relation to the overall approach and strategy taken by HEIs in preparing their impact submissions. We begin by considering the resources HEIs allocated to the process and the implications this had for other activities. We then discuss how uncertainty about the assessment of impact influenced

the level of risk HEIs felt comfortable taking with their REF 2014 submissions.

#### Resources, processes and notable practices utilised by HEIs

The HEIs in our sample provided different levels and types of support towards the preparation for impact assessment. For some, support was more centralised, whereas in other HEIs responsibility was devolved to UOAs or departments. Partially as a result of this, processes and practices were often not standardised within an HEI, and the level and type of support depended on the needs of particular UOAs. Instances were described where case studies were all written by the UOA coordinator, while in other cases the coordinator was responsible for collating the submission and managing the process, but the documents were written by colleagues. A summary of the different kinds of support provided by HEIs preparing impact submissions is given in Box 2-1.

#### Resources allocated to the preparation of the impact submission

The resources that HEIs allocated to the impact element of the REF included staff time and money (see Box 2-2). Financial costs included hiring new staff in impact-related support posts and redeploying existing staff to cover impact preparation activities. Some HEIs also hired external consultants and professional writers. A full analysis of the monetary costs associated with these activities is provided in Chapter 5.

The value of hiring external consultants was discussed during the site visits. Interviewees highlighted the

#### Box 2-1: Types of support HEIs provided for the development of impact submissions

- Staff training and mentoring
- Mock REF exercises
- Production of exemplar case studies
- Review and revision of impact case study and impact template documents by central team
- Compliance with eligibility criteria checked and confirmed by a central committee
- Use of an impact support group, including research and support staff
- Workshops or symposia bringing people together to discuss impact and the case studies at various points in the process
- Joint input from central team and researcher to piece together impact narratives and write up case studies
- Internal and external peer review, sometimes across disciplines

**Box 2-2: Financial expenditure by HEIs to support their impact submissions**

- New posts: Impact Officers (at a panel or UOA level), REF Manager, professional writers/journalists, research communications manager
- Impact champions/leads/coordinators: researchers trained about impact who could support an impact case study development within a UOA and cascade training and impact knowledge to others
- External support: copy editor, consultants/contractors
- Support from internal teams within professional services: research office, finance, technology transfer, and communications office
- Additional financial resources provided to support authors to evidence claims and produce case studies

importance of understanding the subject area when drafting case studies, and also engaging research staff fully in order to ensure culture change within the HEI, which limited the value of external consultants. Interviewees in institutions in which impact officers had been appointed or seconded from other parts of the institution reported benefits arising from research staff and impact officers working together and thereby deepening institutional knowledge of, and engagement with, the impact agenda.

Most interviewees regarded time as the biggest cost in preparing their institution's impact submission.<sup>16</sup> It was generally reported that the impact element required a disproportionate amount of time relative to its value in the overall submission (20 per cent). Interviewees estimated that between 33 per cent and 80 per cent of their time spent on preparing the entire REF submission was spent on this new element.<sup>17</sup> One reason for this was given by an interviewee:

*There is no feeling about when a[n impact] case study is good enough. There is no limit to the amount of work that can be put into a[n impact] case study.*

### Uncertainty and risk

Participating HEIs suggested that impact submissions were prepared in an environment with high levels of uncertainty about the process and the outcome. This influenced the extent to which they were prepared to take risks with their submissions. The lack of information in guidance from the funding bodies about how impact would be assessed by panels was a particular

concern. Uncertainty about panel behaviour – especially the role of research users in the assessment process – affected HEIs interpretation of the eligibility criteria for the case studies. For example, some HEIs applied the rules to the letter while others adopted looser interpretations. Similar variations in approach were also found between UOAs within the same institution. There was a general appeal for the HE funding councils to release guidance for the next REF exercise at the start of the process rather than part-way through the cycle, and to maintain continuity with the most recent REF, rather than introduce radical change.

Given the mixed membership of panels, which comprise academics and research users, some interviewees were unsure of the audience for their case studies. Would research users want to see impact more quickly than academics on the panel might expect, for example? Concerns were raised about the panels' ability to apply the REF guidance consistently when assessing different types of research impact: 'we have worked with the definition [of impact] for longer than the panel'.

In particular, some interviewees worried that panels would favour some types of impact and evidence over others, despite the REF guidance stipulating that 'criteria will be applied in the assessment of the research impact regardless of the domain to which the impact relates'. Would economic impact be preferred over policy impact? Would sustained impact be viewed more favourably than short-term impact? Is evidence of reach stronger than evidence of significance, and are both required? How can panels judge case studies presenting different types of impact fairly? Interviewees

<sup>16</sup> These were individuals with a management oversight role for submissions at a UOA or higher level.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that this range could be in part influenced by the different processes and structures at different institutions as well as the varying scope of individuals' roles, in contributing to the REF submission.

gave examples where these questions shaped decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of case studies in their submission for impact assessment. Some also speculated that lack of clarity on these points may result in panels simply assuming that the most reliable indicator of research impact is the quality of the underpinning research, and will assume uncritically that the highest quality research will result in the best impact.

Reassurance and clarification were therefore sought from the HE funding councils about how the REF panels will assess impact. Detailed feedback on the assessment outcomes was requested in order to improve future REF impact submissions, and some interviewees called for the publication of assessment scores for all impact case studies in the interests of transparency.

The high degree of uncertainty surrounding institutional preparations for the impact element of the submission also resulted in the majority of interviewees describing their strategy for these preparations as being broadly risk averse or conservative in the selection of case studies. They described the process as a balancing act between ensuring that an impact case study would not be classified as ineligible (e.g. in terms of the quality of the underpinning research or the impacts claimed), and being confident that every impact case study was backed up by the highest quality of supporting evidence.<sup>18</sup>

Where institutions adhered closely to rules and made very 'safe' submissions, there was the 'hope' that panels would be as 'rigorous' in evaluating all the impact case studies as they had been in developing them.

Institutions adopted a range of different strategies to mitigate the attendant risks. For example, some included one or two impact case studies that they were less certain about in a larger submission. Others highlighted different types of impact within the case studies submitted to one UOA, or minimised the number of impact case studies to those for which they were completely confident they had sufficient evidence. Inevitably, in some cases this resulted in more impact case studies being developed than were required and then studies being dropped at the final stages prior to submission.

### Implications and opportunity costs

The site visit interviews revealed that the burden of preparing impact submissions fell to a small number

of mostly senior academic staff, a finding supported by data from the surveys (discussed in Chapter 3) and the cost estimations (described in Chapter 4). At some institutions this concentration resulted from impact coordinators feeling others did not understand the guidelines sufficiently, or that specific experience in presenting research to multiple audiences was needed. Sometimes one individual coordinated the impact submission, supported impact case study authors, attended meetings, collected impact evidence, and wrote and reviewed case studies. In some cases these responsibilities were in addition to the other elements of the REF submission. Interviewees gave examples of knock-on effects on regular 'day-to-day' activities (such as research, teaching and administration) and even adverse health effects on the individuals involved in the process. Overall, interviewees believed that the time required to prepare the impact submission had not been fully appreciated by those who agreed to contribute, nor by those who were overseeing the process from a central perspective. Some respondents equated the time taken to write an impact case study to other academic activities such as writing a grant application or a journal article.

Opportunity costs of preparing the impact submission included time not spent conducting research, applying for grants, writing papers and other publications, attending conferences, and generating further commercialisation or impact opportunities. These missed opportunities were perceived most strongly by the individuals affected, whereas the benefits of the REF as a whole were first and foremost identified at an institutional level.

The centrality of the impact case studies within the impact element of the submission placed added pressure on the few individuals with responsibility for producing the documents. At two HEIs, examples were given of individuals who fell ill prior to the submission date and took stress-related leave. At other HEIs individuals reported that the pressure of the process had a detrimental impact on their well-being even a few months after submission.

### 2.3.2. Operations

This section discusses observations about the operational aspects of the preparations for submitting the

<sup>18</sup> There was concern from interviewees that the case studies submitted were not a true reflection of the impact of research within UK HEIs. For example, in UOAs that brought together more basic and applied subjects, anecdotal examples were given where the impact case study submission focused on a strong area of impact, thereby not reflecting the breadth of work undertaken.

impact element of REF 2014, including the application of rules in the guidance issued by HE funding bodies. The areas discussed below are those that emerged most prominently from the analysis of the site visit data as particularly challenging or otherwise notable.

There were often differences of opinion within HEIs, and also between HEI central staff and faculty about to how to interpret the rules. On occasion this resulted in conflicting advice and contradictory feedback for impact case study authors. Some interviewees gave examples where a case study was revised in one way after initial review, and then changed back subsequently. Furthermore, some coordinators leading UOA submissions for more than one panel found panel-specific guidance contradictory and confusing when read across panels, while others who were only responsible for submitting to a single panel found the panel-specific guidance helpful. This resulted in two related but distinct requests for future guidance documents. First, there was a general view that all the guidance should be in one document to save people flipping between two different books. Second, there were two opposing minority views that panel guidance should either be more standardised across panels (requested by some of those who worked across UOAs and panels) or that there should be more differentiation between the panel guidance in order to reflect subject differences (requested by those who worked primarily within one UOA).

Overall, there was little consensus in views about the utility of particular aspects of the REF guidance for institutional operations: for every suggestion to keep a rule there was another to change it. We present this range of views below in relation to the most frequently mentioned points.

### Definition of impact

The definition of impact for the REF 2014 is:

*An effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.*  
(REF 2011b)

The majority of interviewees thought that the breadth of this definition and the number of things that it included was useful. In some instances it was commented that this breadth led to an appreciation of the wide range of

impacts which are possible from academic research. Some interviewees suggested this may be especially important for Panel D; others noted the focus on economic and commercial impact in the original definition of impact with particular concern for Panels C and D, and welcomed the revised definition (REF 2009; REF 2011a).<sup>19</sup>

However, interviewees at all HEIs noted that a major challenge in the early stages was developing a shared understanding of 'impact' for the purposes of the REF. The breadth of the definition offered in the guidance meant the term was open to interpretation, and some staff were unsure of the 'correct' usage. Some of the concerns in this area included whether case studies presenting different types of impacts were stronger than those focusing on just one type, and whether some types of impact would be valued more highly than others. Moreover, the definition of impact evolved over time, both in the guidance from the funding councils and in the institutions' understanding and use of the term. To this end, most interviewees found the examples of types of impact provided in the guidance to be useful.

Another challenge identified in operationalising the definition of impact for the REF was the lack of alignment between the REF 2014 and Research Councils UK (RCUK) definitions. RCUK defines impact as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy' but differs from the REF through its inclusion of *academic* impact. Academic impact is defined as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, method, theory and application' (RCUK 2014). HEI researchers are more familiar with the RCUK definition, and some called for integration between the two.

Finally, several interviewees thought that the linear relationship between research outputs and research impact inherent in the REF definition of 'impact' did not reflect the full range of research impact, nor the way in which impact could be achieved. In many instances interviewees thought that impact was not related to a specific output of research, rather to the expertise of the individual resulting from a continuous body of work over a career. In some subjects it is also difficult to establish causal chains from research to impact, as the links are often indirect. This was particularly noted in the instance of practice-based research,

<sup>19</sup> Impact was defined in the pilot as any identifiable benefit to or positive influence on the economy, society, public policy or services, culture, the environment or quality of life.

**Box 2-3: REF criteria definitions**

- **Reach:** the spread or breadth of influence or effect on the relevant constituencies
- **Significance:** the intensity of the influence or effect

where interviewees argued that impact can be achieved before research results are published.

#### Definition of the assessment criteria for impact 'reach' and 'significance'

The REF criteria of impact 'reach' and 'significance' (see Box 2-3) were thought to be useful in supporting institutional preparations for research impact assessment to the extent that they gave some guidance as to how the case studies would be assessed. However, the majority of interviewees at HEIs found the definitions difficult to understand and operationalise. There was a particular difficulty in understanding the need to demonstrate 'reach' beyond geographical reach. This was compounded by the language used for the overall quality profile, and the output and environment sub-panel profiles, which related star levels to geographical coverage. Some argued 'significance' was a more subjective criterion than 'reach' because it relates to particular beneficiary groups impacted by the research. Some HEIs developed worked examples to help colleagues understand and use the terms more effectively in their submissions.

Interviewees also struggled to understand how panels would assess case studies using these criteria. It was not clear whether the two criteria should be balanced, or whether an impact case study could or should focus on one criterion more than the other. The following scenario was used by one HEI to illustrate this point:

*What are the relative merits and likely panel scores for an impact case study describing a drug which cured a... disease affecting a small number of people, compared to an impact case study for a public health initiative affecting many schools?*

Interviewees highlighted difficulties in measuring and quantifying 'reach' and 'significance', particularly with regard to Panels C and D. Some interviewees thought it was not possible to demonstrate policy impact, and several believed it was necessary to use quantitative metrics in order to properly evidence 'reach' and

'significance', although quantitative data were not always available. There was not a consistent shared understanding about the sufficiency of evidence needed to support impact claims.

There was a general call for more explicit guidance regarding the definitions of 'reach' and 'significance' and additional detail on how to weight and balance the relative importance of the criteria. Referencing the need for consistency between HEIs' attempts to operationalise the definitions and panels' use of the criteria for assessment purposes, interviewees requested impact case study examples from REF 2014 illustrating good and bad usages of 'reach' and 'significance' in order to improve future impact assessments.

#### Ratio of FTEs to impact case studies

During the site visits, some interviewees commented that their HEI was constrained in the number of staff submitted to the REF by the requirements to submit two impact case studies for up to 14.99 FTEs and one impact case study for up to every 10 researchers above this. They felt this may have been against their Code of Practice submitted in advance to the HE funding councils, citing the HEI's policy on the fair and transparent selection of staff for submission.<sup>20</sup> Others said their HEI's commitment to implementing their Code of Practice for inclusivity resulted in a large number of impact case studies being submitted.

The FTE to impact case study threshold was raised as an issue for all four panels, but the majority of concerns aired during our site visits were associated with Panels B and C. Anecdotal examples were given where two individuals had the same quality research outputs, but one was excluded due to the need to keep the numbers of FTEs in the UOA below the threshold for an additional impact case study. In other instances, the research output quality threshold for a UOA was raised in order to limit the number of staff returned where impact case studies were at a premium: '[We] didn't want to submit weak [or] ineligible case studies just to include more people'.

<sup>20</sup> The requirement for HEIs to submit a Code of Practice on the selection of staff for the REF is described further at <http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/invitetosubmit/>

This created tension between central REF management staff and UOA coordinators and also within departments between colleagues. Another strategy employed by HEIs was to produce more case studies than required in order to finalise the number of FTEs towards the end of the process. This sometimes meant case studies were dropped close to submission.

*[The] original plan was to be as comprehensive as possible, [but] as time went on and case studies fell by the wayside we became more selective on selection of units.*

In particular, the FTE to impact case study ratio seemed to affect very small and very large UOAs, and newly established research units.<sup>21</sup> Coordinators for large UOAs sometimes found it difficult to generate the requisite number of impact case studies. Newly established departments, and those which had expanded rapidly or experienced high staff turnover, often did not have the volume of underpinning research required to produce the requisite number of case studies. Examples were given in which individuals from small UOAs were reassigned to larger units that could produce the requisite number of case studies. It was also noted that an impact case study is worth more in smaller units: with only two case studies, each is worth 8 per cent of the overall score for the unit; however, four case studies are only worth 4 per cent each of the overall score for larger units. Some interviewees queried whether this was appropriate, or fair.

Greater flexibility in the number of case studies required was called for, particularly for UOAs with fewer than 15 FTEs. It was suggested that the number of case studies could be scaled according to fluctuations in the number of FTEs in the department over the assessment period, or banded at a lower level.

### Quality of underpinning research

The requirement of the impact to be underpinned by research of a quality 'that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour' (research of 2\* quality) was thought to be relatively clear as a rule, though examples were given by the majority of HEIs of where it was challenging. Issues concerning underpinning research quality were raised across all four panels, though more concerns were expressed for Panels C and D.

As the REF aims to assess excellence in research, there was an understanding that impact should be based on research of a certain minimum quality. Some interviewees noted that they did not have any difficulty in meeting the 2\* threshold; indeed, a selection of interviewees (predominantly from Panel A) believed that the 2\* threshold was too low or even irrelevant. Others, however, were not convinced that the best impact comes from the best quality research (or in other words that research excellence and impact are not necessarily connected) and therefore argued that the threshold should be lowered or even removed altogether.

Some interviewees reported that potentially strong case studies had to be dropped because there were doubts over the quality of the underpinning research. The cautious and conservative strategies adopted by the majority of the HEIs in their preparation for impact assessment was often cited as a reason for dropping a case study. In particular, HEI staff said it was difficult to implement the threshold for more applied subjects, as well as practice-based (e.g. performing and visual arts) or interdisciplinary research. They did not always claim demonstrable commercial impacts because these could be underpinned by unpublished research. In some instances those who had published in professional journals, or used public engagement channels to disseminate research rather than traditional peer-reviewed publications, could not demonstrate 2\* quality research and were unable to present impactful research.

Judging the quality of research that had not been through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was found to be a challenge, and interviewees raised concerns about lack of consistency in the assessment of underpinning research quality across disciplines. There was thought to be a lack of clarity about how the quality of underpinning research will be assessed by the panels. What evidence of research quality will be accepted? How can the quality threshold of 'exhibitions' be demonstrated? Will a patent that has had high impact be viewed as at least 2\*? HEIs had to make their own judgements about the quality of the underpinning research and in many cases this was not straightforward.

### Institutional ownership of impact

Within the REF, there are differences between the rules regarding the portability of publications, which 'belong' to the academic and are therefore portable between

<sup>21</sup> For small UOAs this issue was raised across all panels, and for large UOAs it was raised particularly by Panels A and B.



institutions during a REF cycle, and the rules regarding institutional ownership (or non-portability) of impact. HEI staff did not always understand the rationale for institutional ownership of impact. Some recognised the effect on a UOA if impact was portable, as removal of an entire impact case study could potentially affect 10 FTEs if a substitute case study was not found. Others pointed out that since the rules were intended to provide recognition for institutional history and track record in a research area, the likelihood of an impact case study needing to be fully withdrawn was small. In addition, it was thought that the rules would incentivise HEIs to invest in impact as they will potentially reap the rewards from the funding resulting from future REF exercises.

Institutional ownership of impact also caused difficulties when newly recruited individuals were unable to provide or contribute to impact case studies because their research was not conducted at their new institution. However, if newly recruited individuals were returned, their outputs would contribute to the FTE count and potentially increase the requirement for additional case studies within their UOA. This was a particular issue in new departments and disciplines, or those that had rapidly expanded over the assessment period, as the current HEI could not always claim 'ownership' of the underpinning research. This is an example of how the REF impact element could provide a disincentive to launching new research units.

Interviewees also reported difficulties creating case studies based on research conducted by individuals who were no longer at the institution. In some instances, this difficulty was due to the lack of institutional memory and the need to gather information around the impact case study, which often required contacts only held by the individual. Though we did hear examples where former members of staff were happy to help provide a case study, we also heard examples where individuals were not forthcoming or engaged. Often former colleagues were working at a competing institution, had retired or now worked outside the UK (giving them limited understanding of the current process). In other cases where academics moved and continued working in the same field it was not clear what could be attributed and claimed by each HEI. Equally, some institutions found it difficult to engage research users who no longer had a link to the institution through the original researcher. As a result of these issues, interviewees mentioned many instances where case studies were either not developed or were dropped.

## Research and impact windows

The research window (1 January 1993 – 31 December 2013) set time constraints within which research underpinning the claimed impact must have been conducted and published. The ability to look back over time was seen as a benefit by some, but others thought the window was too short, and that 20 years only captured medium-term impacts.

This raises the question of how long it takes to translate research into impact. Within biomedical and health research a body of literature estimates that it takes 15–25 years for research evidence to reach clinical practice.<sup>22</sup> This would fall within the timeframes of the REF but would rely on research from the older end of the timeframe, and, moreover, this estimation cannot necessarily be translated to other disciplines. Some individuals found it difficult to utilise the whole research window and remember what had happened 20 years ago. The research window was also thought to disadvantage new subject areas, departments without a history of research, and early career researchers, who have less established research to build impact case studies around. Some interviewees queried whether a research window was required at all, as the overall assessment focuses on the timeframe within which the impact occurred and this is the aspect which is being scored.

The impact window (1 January 2008 – 31 July 2013) set time constraints within which the impact must have occurred in order to qualify for inclusion. Some interviewees felt this range to be problematic and found 31 July 2013 a seemingly arbitrary deadline (especially compared to the deadline for research publications, which was 31 December 2013). It was argued that impact did not stop due to this deadline and that some important impacts were not included because they may not have been announced before 31 July, or because the impact happened in early August. Some suggested that the date for the end of the impact window should be similar to the date of REF submission (30 November), or that the impact window should end one year before submission. This latter suggestion would allow time for gathering evidence.

The end date of the window was not the only issue, as interviewees also pointed to instances where impact had started in advance of the impact window, but continued to have an impact during the relevant period. It was felt these types of impact were difficult to evidence and it was hard to know whether evidence from before the

<sup>22</sup> See Slote Morris et al. (2011) for a review.

impact window could be presented to demonstrate this continuum. A consequence of the timeframes for underpinning research and impact could be that it is harder for junior researchers to develop a case study. There is the risk, therefore, that more junior researchers concentrate on outputs that are portable rather than research that has impact, the latter taking longer to materialise and not transportable as their career progresses.

Due to the publication of final guidance in July 2011 (REF 2011b) part way through the submission period, interviewees highlighted the challenge of tracing impact retrospectively. It was recognised, though, that this issue results in large part from it being the first time impact has been included in the REF. Many felt that for the next REF HEIs will be collecting data on an ongoing basis and that this issue will be minimised.

Finally, uncertainties remain about timescales for the next REF. What will happen to impact that occurred between August and December 2013? Interviewees were unclear whether this will be captured next time, or whether the timeframe would start from January 2014. Questions were also asked about how the research window or impact windows will shift next time and whether impact case studies submitted for REF 2014 could be resubmitted for the next REF if the impact continued into the new period.

Interdisciplinary research, multi-institutional research and the distinct contribution of the submitting HEI

The rules of the REF permit one case study to be submitted to different UOAs or by two institutions, provided that the distinct contribution of each UOA or institution is made clear. Though many welcomed the premise of this rule, there were difficulties in applying it in practice.

Where there was a case study that relied on research which covered multiple disciplines or UOAs, interviewees found it difficult to attribute impact and decide the distinct contribution of each partner. There were questions about how such impact case studies should be 'branded' and about the difficulties of interdisciplinary departments that may not align neatly with any of the 36 UOAs. Interviewees reported that they were sometimes unsure how and whether to submit case studies that spanned more than one UOA. For these reasons, a small number of interviewees felt that the REF discourages interdisciplinary research. Broader questions were also raised about how interdisciplinary research will be assessed by the REF sub-panels.

*Our UOA was across [departments] so we didn't have a coherent model and there was a process of harmonisation.*

However, this view was not shared by everyone and some interviewees remarked that one of the 'side effects' of introducing impact into the REF could be that it actually promotes interdisciplinary and collaborative research. Fields of research in which it was difficult to demonstrate impact could be 'linked' with other fields, thereby enabling impact case studies to be submitted that, on their own, might have been more challenging to develop. Interviewees across all four main panels gave examples where producing case studies based on interdisciplinary research was not a problem. Staff at a minority of HEIs said that they would be looking for more interdisciplinary collaborations to foster impact as it allows greater 'value' impact if it can be claimed in multiple places within one submission.

As with interdisciplinary research within one institution, in collaborative projects spanning HEIs, interviewees remarked that they found it difficult to identify and evidence the unique contribution of their own institution (particularly on a retrospective basis). Specific fields where this was an issue included medicine (Panel A), where clinical trials in particular are published by the consortium or group rather than individual authors. Conversely, engineering disciplines (UOAs 12–15) were cited as an example where this was less of an issue, because the structure of collaborative working often focuses on individuals with expertise in particular methods and techniques. This made it easier to identify who contributed what and when. In a small number of interviews the fairness of impact assessment across institutions was questioned, with examples where evidence for a collaborative impact case study was provided to one institution, but not to the other.

As discussed above in relation to institutional ownership of impact, there were varying degrees of difficulty in working with individuals who had moved HEIs during the REF period. Some examples were cited in which academics had moved, but continued out of 'goodwill' to work with their previous institutions in order to develop an impact case study. However, there were others who told us they just 'didn't bother' contacting colleagues who had left because putting an impact case study together in these circumstances would be too hard.

Where multi-institutional collaboration was involved in the production of case studies, different approaches to collaborating were found in our sample. It was noted

that there was a dynamic tension between collaboration and competition. Though we did come across some examples of institutions working together to produce a case study, generally there was a reluctance to share information between institutions because of the potential ‘risks’ involved. This was felt to discourage collaboration between HEIs on the whole. One interviewee remarked that this general nervousness to share information was one of the ‘filters’ that the REF put on reporting impact and consequently REF impact case studies were not a realistic representation of research impact in the sector.

Providing evidence for the impact case studies (REF3b)

#### *Different types of evidence*

All impact case studies required evidence demonstrating the claimed impacts, including up to ten sources that could independently verify the impact and including contact details for up to five research users. Broadly, two types of evidence were presented in the case studies:

- Documentary evidence that is publically available and could be found through Internet searches or using information obtained from the research user.
- Statements from research users, such as testimonials submitted with the impact case study or research user contact details for the assessment panel to use for auditing purposes.

Perceptions of which of these two types of evidence was best differed across our sample. There was general agreement that third-party citations and reports were the gold standard of evidence. One HEI did not submit case studies based only on testimonial evidence because they thought this approach was too high a risk. Where statements from research users were included, some HEIs preferred to have a testimonial and tried to avoid only using contact details. In other instances, contact details were used where letters of support could not be obtained. As will be discussed below, this often occurred in cases where commercial confidentiality prevented people from wanting to provide a written testimonial.

The independence of testimonials submitted as supporting evidence for claimed impact was also questioned. One interviewee commented, ‘we would only go to people who would write glowing things’. In some instances, HEI staff drafted the testimonials as the research users would not necessarily know what kind of information was needed. There needed to be a

balance between ‘giving them guidance into making a statement [while] you must try not to put words into their mouths’.

#### *Difficulties collecting impact evidence*

Overall, interviewees thought evidencing the impact claims was the most difficult element of creating the case studies. One impact case study author commented they found themselves thinking ‘more about the evidence rather than the impact. The question was “can I evidence this?”’ Collecting evidence retrospectively was a difficulty experienced by many.

*A lot of time was spent trying to find out this information and trying to find the right people to provide supporting evidence.*

Interviewees acknowledged this should be different next time round because of the systems and structures being put in place to capture and preserve evidence of impact on an ongoing basis (see Box 2-6 in Section 2.3.3).

There were two kinds of difficulties experienced in collecting evidence. First, there were perceived difficulties relating to the relationship a researcher had with different research users. There was a general consensus amongst interviewees that it was easier to collect evidence of impact where researchers had ongoing relationships or previously established connections and networks. Successful impact evidence collection often relied on personal contacts and research user goodwill. However, interviewees did not always feel comfortable using their relationship with research users to get this information and worried it risked damaging their relationship. As one interviewee said, ‘[we] did not want to irritate people who were potentially valuable to the university in the long term’. In the case of smaller organisations, such as local businesses, museums and charities, interviewees were aware that these research users had little capacity for providing the data requested and they felt uncomfortable asking for it.

Despite these difficulties, once the request was made, most interviewees did not report difficulties asking for evidence, and some found conversations with research users to be productive and affirming. Within HEIs in our sample, there seems to be a greater awareness of the need to think about evidence requirements up front, and build that into a relationship from the beginning. This raises questions about the extent to which the perception of damaged relationships was just a perception, or a reality. Indeed, one interviewee remarked:

*Academics were more twitchy about confidentiality than the firm. They were worried that pestering people they collaborate with could jeopardise their relationship.*

We comment further on this in Chapter 4 and in the accompanying *Findings and observations* report.

Second, interviewees identified a number of types of impact that were particularly difficult to measure and evidence, which limited the narrative of their case studies. These included:

- Policy changes where original research is not always referenced in ‘impact’ documentation and there are many influences that lead to the action taken (and the impact claimed).
- Public engagement impacts where the impact is beyond dissemination activity.
- Cultural impacts, for example changes to attitude, behaviour and perception where there is no baseline and data are not routinely collected.
- Evidence of something *not* happening – for example, research that led to a product not being used, or research improving a safety standard that meant accidents did not happen, or research determining that something did not work and therefore was not implemented.
- Unpopular but important research where research users would not acknowledge or recognise the importance of the research.
- Impact where it was difficult to identify or reach the target audience, for example well-being and improvements to people’s quality of life.

Interviewees at the majority of HEIs mentioned research users’ reluctance to provide confidential and sensitive commercial information, such as sales data, revenues and figures about expanding markets and new product lines. The specific industries mentioned in interviews were the pharmaceutical sector, trade publishers and industrial sectors including oil, gas and mineral exploration. One reason for this reluctance reported to us by interviewees at HEIs was that companies were not convinced by the confidentiality arrangements in place. One interviewee said ‘safeguards which we presented were not accepted’, others said research users were reluctant to put into writing what they would say verbally.

*Companies naturally withhold information, even if you tell them it can be redacted from case studies. Why would they take the risk of sharing sensitive information when they don’t have to?*

In other instances, companies may not want to admit that research conducted by an HEI underpins their product. One interviewee provided examples of two CEOs of European organisations who refused to acknowledge the research that had contributed to their businesses.

A significant minority of HEIs mentioned instances in which the reluctance of a research user to provide supporting evidence resulted in the withdrawal of case studies. In other instances case studies were submitted but perceived to be weak as they lacked evidence that was known to exist but was not supplied, or had to be refocused as a result of the unavailability of evidence.

There were a few challenges specifically associated with providing testimonials. The guidance documents stated that only five testimonials could be provided per case study. Since the final guidance was released well into the REF cycle, many people had to adjust their case studies so they did not exceed this maximum limit. Where impact case study authors had a choice of testimonials to include, there were often difficulties in assessing whether some testimonials were more ‘valuable’ than other sources of evidence; for example, does a testimonial hold more weight if it comes from a more senior person?

It is important to note that the difficulties discussed above were not reported across all interviewees. For example, one interviewee said that impacts on spin-outs were relatively easy to evidence compared to research adopted by multinational corporations. In the latter case, the specific input from one HEI could not be disentangled from the other inputs contributing to the claimed impact. Another interviewee felt that it was easier to gather evidence of social impact from community groups, as opposed to more economic or commercially focused impacts from large corporations.

#### *Working with research users to provide evidence*

As mentioned above, several HEIs reported difficulties in working with research users to provide evidence. While only a small number of research users refused outright to respond to requests for supporting evidence, in many cases research users either failed to reply or provided bland testimonials that were not fit for purpose. Difficulty engaging research users was specifically associated with Panels C and D. Here several interviewees commented there was no specific ‘research user’ community. Where the main end user was simply the general public, impact case study authors looked for an intermediary who could comment on the user experience, or the impact on

themselves. This form of evidence, though, could only demonstrate a limited reach.

Interviewees felt that the lack of awareness of the REF outside the HE sector exacerbated problems in working with research users to obtain evidence. The lack of a shared understanding of the REF impact requirements within the sector was also an issue: even where research users were happy to provide evidence they sometimes did not know what was required because impact case study authors did not always know what to ask for. This resulted in time wasting and some interviewees worried that an unnecessary burden was being placed on their research partners. Contacting international research users was a particular challenge. One interviewee said that research users outside the UK were ‘almost impossible to get hold of, do not keep statistics nor understand the value of doing so’.

Other reasons for research users being either unwilling or unable to corroborate or provide evidence for impact included information not being available, beneficiaries not having the time to search for/provide evidence, and users being concerned that they would have to seek senior management approval for information/statements, which could be a complicated process. One interviewee commented that ‘there was not a great awareness of REF impact in industry’.

#### *Improving impact evidence*

Interviewees made a number of suggestions for improving the process of evidence collection. They suggested there is a need for increased clarity in the guidance regarding:

- What counted as evidence for different types of impact
- What level of evidence is required
- What a valuable corroborating source is
- How the corroborating letters (testimonials) will be used
- How to deal with international case studies and the level of translation required
- What level of assistance should be provided to research users providing impact evidence.

Specific improvements that were suggested included increasing the number of testimonials allowed and using them to assess the quality of the research and associated impact rather than purely as an auditing tool. Alternatively, other interviews asked whether the evidence requirements could be reduced. In order to help institutions with the task of collecting evidence, some suggested that the HE funding councils could facilitate linkages with other governmental organisations (e.g. the NHS) to provide standard sources of evidence

that would be available to the whole sector. Some felt a more centralised process would be helpful in addressing the difficulties, though others disagreed with this. Discipline-specific impact templates for standardising testimonials were also suggested. Information from the HE funding councils to help research users understand the process of research impact assessment and their role in it was suggested. There were also suggestions about the way HEIs communicated the benefits of participation to their local research stakeholders, including involving research users in internal impact case study review panels.

#### Preparing impact templates (REF3a)

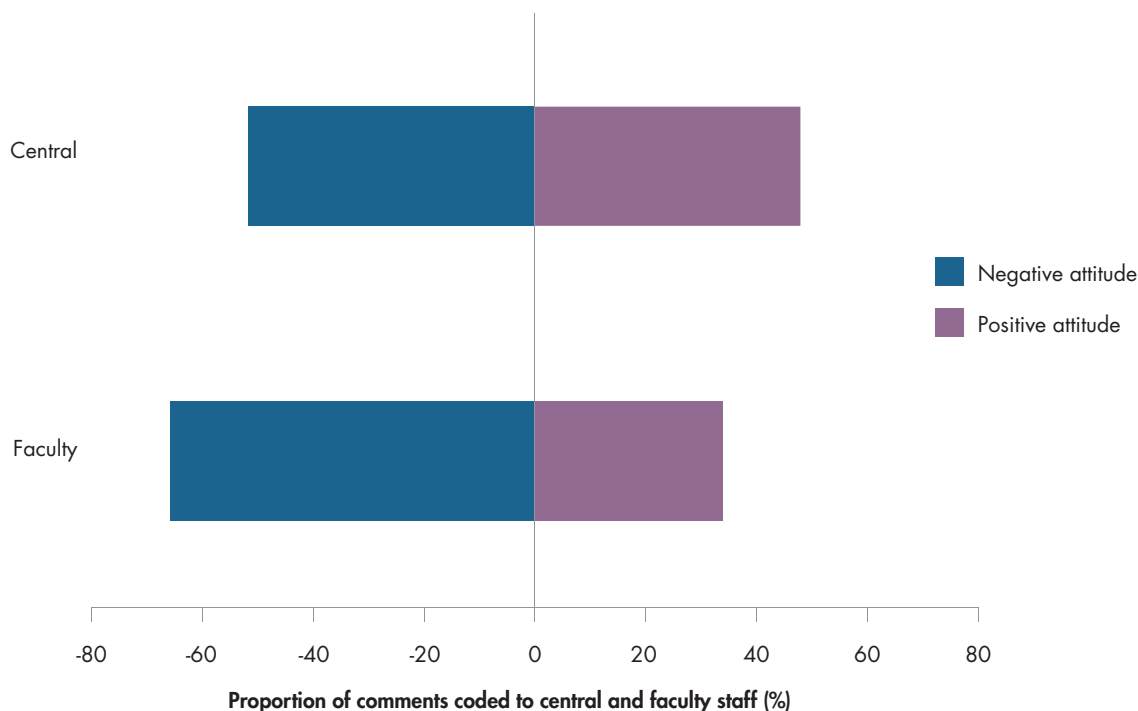
In addition to providing specific case study examples of research impact during the reference period, each UOA had to present an impact strategy in an impact template document (REF3a). Information was included under the following headings:

- A. Context
- B. Approach to impact
- C. Strategy and plans
- D. Relationship to case studies.

Some UOAs created retrospective impact strategies because they did not have one for the whole reference period, a process interviewees found artificial and unhelpful. Others valued the process because it allowed them to crystallise their future strategy and think about research impact beyond the REF. The impact template highlighted different approaches to and strategies for increasing impact. Others welcomed the opportunity to discuss research impacts that could not be submitted as full case studies because the impact was not sufficiently developed or there was not enough evidence.

The main challenges that interviewees highlighted resulted from the funding bodies’ guidance, which was generally viewed as unhelpful and vague compared with the more detailed impact case study guidance. It was not clear what should go in each section, and on occasion different people provided different interpretations. In particular there were queries around the purpose of Section D (Relationship to case studies) and interviewees were not certain whether this should be a summary of the impact case study documents, an assessment of the mechanism used in the examples to produce the impact, or something else. The confusion over the different elements of the document was further compounded by the fact that some areas of the impact template would not be scored by some panels. This meant that interviewees were not sure how much weight and

Figure 2-1: Positive and negative comments coded to central (n=200 comments) and faculty (n=290 comments) staff



information to include in different sections. It was also not clear what level of evidence, if any, was required to support the statements made about impact processes and strategies within the UOA. The REF5 (environment statement) uses metrics to assess the research environment that the HEI and UOA have created, but it was not clear whether this type of evidence was required for the impact element.

The length of the document was only three pages, with the limit increasing to four pages if the UOA had more than 34.99 FTEs. Many commented that the page limit made it difficult to fit in the required information, particularly for larger UOAs and those containing a number of disparate research groups or subject areas (sometimes within different schools within an institution).

A significant minority of interviewees would prefer more weight to be given to the impact template (REF3a) in the overall assessment of UOA submissions and that the weighting should be increased relative to the impact case studies (REF3b). It was felt that this is the element of the submission HEIs can control and case studies could become examples of a successful strategy. In addition, this would reduce the effect of staff turnover and the inability to submit impact case studies for researchers who had recently joined the department. An

alternative view was to combine the impact and environment impact templates (REF3a and REF5) as some felt they covered similar ground, albeit from different angles. Merging the two would provide a more holistic document about the research environment, including impact. However, others argued in favour of retaining the centrality of the case studies and maintaining the separation between impact and environment.

### 2.3.3. HEI culture

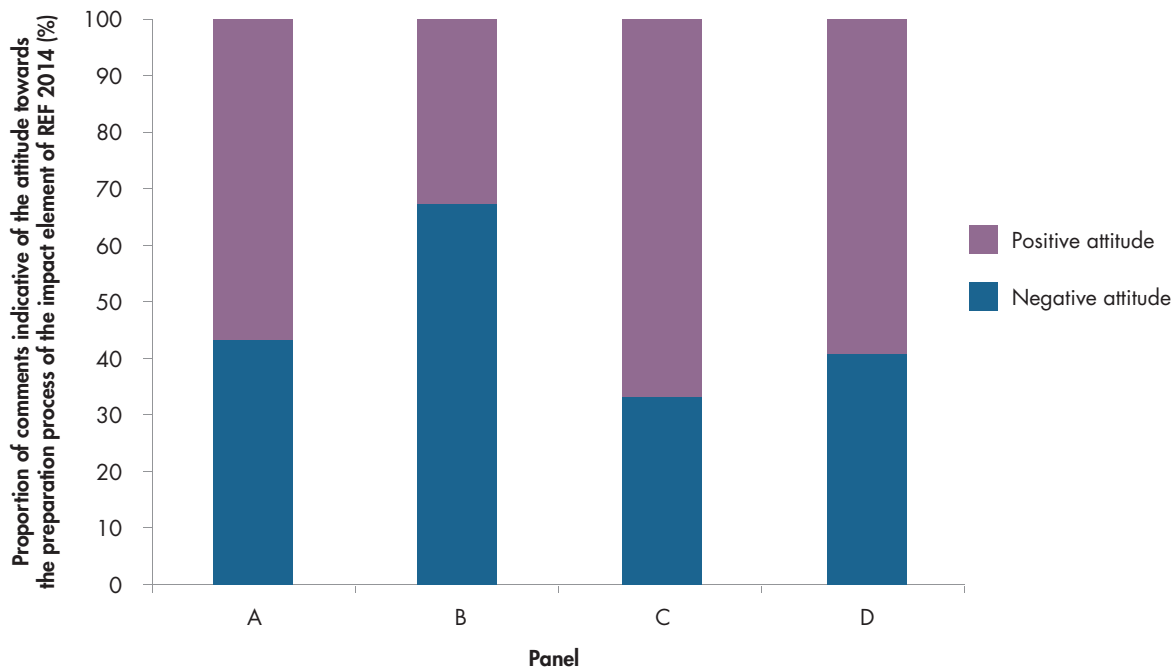
We define 'culture' as the predisposition of the HEI and its staff towards research impact. This section discusses institutional research impact cultures before and after the REF 2014 submission and the effect of culture on preparations for the REF impact assessment.

#### Diversity of attitudes towards the impact preparation process

One of the key findings highlighted in our *Findings and observations* report is that there was as much diversity in views about impact within institutions as between them. In order to explore these differences in attitudes within HEIs, we analysed the relative distribution of positive and negative comments made in relation to impact during our site visits.<sup>23</sup> First, we looked at the

<sup>23</sup> Comments here refer to statements made during a site visit and attributed to an individual.

Figure 2-2: Positive and negative comments coded to the four panels (n=199)



differences between staff who oversaw the process from a central position within the institution (either administrative or senior leaders of the institution) and faculty staff within departments or UOAs (Figure 2-1).

As can be seen in Figure 2-1, central staff who were responsible for managing institutional preparations for the REF 2014 research impact assessment were considerably more positive about the process than the contributing faculty staff.<sup>24</sup> We also see a difference in positive and negative attitudes between panels (Figure 2-2), although it is important to note that fewer data were directly attributed to the panel level and therefore there are fewer data points in this figure (n=199). Nevertheless, we can see that respondents were more negative when referring to or submitting to Panel B, and more positive for Panel C.<sup>25</sup>

When looking for an explanation behind the difference between central and faculty staff, we noted in our analysis that central staff regarded the process of preparing for

the REF 2014 research impact assessment as a positive experience in a number of ways; these are highlighted in the benefits section below.

Faculty, however, felt the process was disproportionately burdensome on a few individuals whose other work – including research – suffered. For some individuals the costs have been high:

*Because of the 1:10 FTE rule for the impact case studies, the impact agenda has passed by 90 per cent of colleagues while the remaining 10 per cent resent it deeply.*

Second, some faculty argued that the underpinning research for impact case studies was of a lower quality than research without demonstrable impact. There were reports of excellent (but not demonstrably impactful) researchers being excluded from REF 2014 submissions because UOAs were unable to generate the requisite number of impact case studies for their inclusion. Some

<sup>24</sup> Central staff were defined as either administrative or senior leaders of the institution. Faculty were defined as academic staff who have contributed directly to the development of impact case studies and/or impact templates. Site visit interview comments concerning 'culture of the institution' and 'consequences of the impact element of the process' were coded as 'positive' or 'negative' depending on the nature of the views expressed, and analysed by 'central' and 'faculty' staff. Figure 2-1 shows the proportion of positive and negative comments made within all comments by 'central' and 'faculty' staff concerning 'culture' and 'consequences'.

<sup>25</sup> As shown in Figure 2-2, this is not biased by the number of individuals associated with each panel in our sample, as they range from 22 to 29 per cent of the sample.

faculty also expressed concern that REF 2014 research impact assessment could change research priorities (see discussion below):

*[There is a] danger we will end up doing consultancy research for impact rather than research we're interested in.*

*[We] may have to generate a publication that [we] wouldn't have otherwise generated just to create impact, which is dumb.*

Third, some faculty felt that the impact element of REF 2014 will limit career advancement opportunities and potentially damage the international reputation of UK higher education.

*In addition to the huge time and monetary costs across the sector because of this exercise, the damage to the reputation of the sector is another issue.*

Although central staff were considerably less negative in their attitude, they did express some concerns, including: uncertainty about how panels would assess their submissions; worries about newer and smaller UOAs; how and whether junior researchers would be able to participate in impact in the future (as they generally

move between institutions more frequently); and the effect of impact on the type of research undertaken.

Benefits of the impact element of the REF 2014 submission process

There were a range of views expressed during our site visits about the benefits of preparing the impact submission documents for REF 2014. The main benefits are summarised in Box 2-4.

While we do not discuss all of these in detail, some are worth examining further. A number of HEIs commented that the impact case studies would be useful for marketing and advocacy purposes, and many highlighted how they will 'repurpose' the case studies to promote and publicise their research impact externally, either on websites or in promotional material. In particular HEIs emphasised the importance of promoting their research and value at a regional level. Going forward, some interviewees believe that promotion of case studies and the application of research will support student recruitment and bring wider benefits to the HEI. Many HEIs also commented that it was helpful to have a catalogue of impact case studies collated in one place, as it gave them a greater appreciation of the work their colleagues do outside academia.

#### Box 2-4: Benefits of the process of preparing the impact submission

- Sharpened the understanding of impact, which is required for funding applications (e.g. RCUK)
- Increased engagement with, and awareness of, researchers about impact, informing the design of research projects
- Put impact on the HEI's agenda
- Helped to bring together areas of the support services and link academic and academic support departments to work more closely through realisation that research and impact are a continuum
- Attached value to impact-related activities, which has benefitted applied subject areas as well as staff who were already undertaking engagement activities
- Informed HEI impact and engagement strategy with research users (primarily facilitated through the impact template document)
- Allowed articulation of the value of their research, which is important in forming collaborations and justifying public sector funding
- Provided insight into what colleagues do – which in future could lead to increased collaborations and interdisciplinary research
- Provided useful information for advocacy and marketing materials
- Alerted researchers to impact arising from their research that was previously unknown
- Encouraged greater engagement with research users, strengthened and reinforced relationships and helped HEIs to identify groups to work with



Some interviewees felt that the process recognised the inherent value of applied research and engagement of research users. It boosted the self-esteem and morale of researchers involved in these areas and improved their parity of esteem with ‘pure’ researchers. One interviewee remarked that preparing for impact assessment ‘shone a light on the underplayed and undervalued’ and others reported changes to staff promotion and reward schemes to recognise contributions to the process.

Central staff thought that staff capacity building and training that supported preparations for impact assessment had a positive effect on attitudes.

*Academics are much more familiar with the language and less resistant and less recalcitrant about it now.*

As a result of training it was observed that researchers were planning impact activities at the outset of their research and have developed a much better awareness of research impact methodologies. One interviewee said ‘I noticed my perception of research changing’ and another commented ‘the whole idea of impact is becoming much more embedded in the everyday activity of colleagues’.

The process of preparing for impact assessment was also deemed to be helpful in fostering collaboration with research stakeholders and considering the needs of research users. It has encouraged institutions to create or strengthen research impact strategies: one HEI was creating ‘engagement and public benefit strategies’ within its schools, several others were using impact templates to inform departmental impact plans, and a central staff member at another regarded school meetings to discuss impact strategies as an ‘amazingly positive’ step forward.

Central staff at several HEIs said impact is and has always been part of their institutional mission, but that they felt the REF submission process had provided them the opportunity to assess and confirm their commitment to impact. In some cases they were able to crystallise and operationalise this part of their mission by clarifying their forward strategies and processes. In this regard, interviewees highlighted that the REF was not the only mechanism that was encouraging culture change, but was a factor in combination with other mechanisms such as the RCUK’s ‘Pathways to Impact’ (RCUK 2014).

Many respondents across all participating HEIs agreed that the full benefits of the process will not be realised until the results are known, and that these results could alter people’s perceptions of those benefits. A minority

of central staff said they could not see any benefits so far, or thought the benefits gained were marginal compared to the costs and effort.

Implications of assessing impact on the nature of the research base

A concern expressed by interviewees at most participating HEIs was the effect of the exercise, and the impact agenda more broadly, on the type of research that is being carried out in higher education. Many felt that by including impact in the REF it suggested that ‘basic’ or ‘pure’ research was not as highly valued. There was a concern that in the future people will choose research areas in order to have impact that can be measured and evidenced.

*New research questions are being asked, but there is some danger in that the emphasis is going to be too much on applications of research and not on curiosity-driven research.*

Within science subjects, for example, one interviewee felt that achieving four 3\* publications during the assessment period was a relatively easy threshold, whereas having an impact case study is a more difficult achievement to strive for.

*[There is a] risk that some of the brightest and best researchers will move from world-class blue skies research to shorter term impactful studies just to satisfy the REF.*

It was also felt that this issue was exacerbated for smaller departments, where there were a limited number of research areas and projects from which to select impact case studies. In one instance, due to limited human resources, an interviewee said their whole group was investing in a single project that they hope will generate an impact case study for the next REF. Concerns were also expressed about some disciplines, including chemistry, physics and mathematics (UOAs 8, 9 and 10, respectively), being redirected towards research designed to show economic benefit or other impacts, thereby potentially narrowing the focus of research undertaken. More negative comments about the potential distortion of the research base were made by interviewees from Panels A and B compared with Panels C and D.

Another perceived implication of the inclusion of impact as part of the REF is the risk of discouraging HEIs from developing new research areas. Respondents felt this might happen because initially new research groups

would not have case studies which built on an existing research base within the institution and therefore would not be eligible for submission to the REF. There were also some who expressed concern that junior researchers were disadvantaged by not yet being able to demonstrate impact for their research. One interviewee commented:

*It disenfranchises early career researchers, as looking back on 20 years of research can't be done for 25 year olds.*

Relatedly, a number of interviewees also believed that the work of PhD students should have been included.

Although the definition of impact was generally broad (see Section 2.3.2), there were some activities that were heavily caveated in the guidance, or to some extent excluded, including public engagement and impacts on higher education. Many interviewees viewed this as problematic. Impacts within the higher education sector, for example those on students or teaching, were only eligible where they extended significantly beyond the submitting HEI. Interviewees consequently expressed confusion as to what exactly could be claimed. As a result of the uncertainty, many interviewees reported to us that they avoided presenting impact case studies in these areas. Others went so far as to express concern that teaching would suffer, given that it may no longer be prioritised by academics as an area of research. Some thought that the exclusion of teaching weakens the argument that knowledge is important to society, and misses the impact of knowledge transfer.

There were also concerns about how public engagement activities would be affected by the REF. Impacts resulting from public engagement activities were only eligible within Panel B, as outreach and dissemination is viewed in the guidance as part of the pathway to achieving impact but not as the end point of impact (REF 2012). However, impacts on public debate and discourse could be claimed across all panels where evidence was provided to show the impacts on the individuals who engaged as a result of that debate and discourse (for example evidence of a shift in the nature of the debate or changed behaviours). Many interviewees, particularly in Panels C and D, found this difficult to evidence and again they did not always feel confident submitting case studies as a result. There was, therefore, a concern that this would discourage people from involvement in public engagement activities due to ambiguity in its importance and value in relation to impact. This was particularly thought to be a problem in Panel D, where engagement activities are valued across the disciplines. It was also noted that it was not clear when dissemination or engagement becomes impact – for example if a television programme is watched by millions of viewers does that count as impact and how would it be evidenced?

The notion that teaching or public engagement activities may suffer as a result of the REF links to a larger point, which is that the act of defining impact may skew the types of impact that people value and therefore focus their efforts on, to the detriment of other activities and potentially more innovative types of impact. Whether these types of impacts are included in subsequent assessments or not, interviewees thought that more clarity

#### Box 2-5: Examples of HEI practices fostering a culture of impact

- Allocation of resources: for example, funding for impact activity or supporting outputs where individuals are strong in outreach activities
- Including impact as a criterion for awarding sabbatical leave
- Restructuring of institutions to define the focus around more applied outcomes
- Use of a working group or advisory board to identify impactful research early on
- Linking of researchers with individuals who had case studies this time to act as mentors
- Review of published research to identify potential impact case studies
- Ongoing delivery of training programmes for researchers and support staff
- Formation of an 'impact plan' to sit alongside the research
- Increased emphasis by the HEI on innovation engagement
- Strategic support for interdisciplinary research

**Box 2-6: Examples of practices in place to 'capture' impact going forwards**

- Requirement to log impact on an ongoing basis:
  - Providing all academics with a box or specific file within which to keep hard copies of evidence
  - Introducing systems to store an electronic record of impact
  - Publishing of impact-related activities within a newsletter
- Annual auditing of evidence collected
- Professional support and resources to collect and verify data

was required in the guidance, to make it more explicit what can be submitted.

### Embedding a culture of impact

There is evidence of culture change within HEIs and their strategies, and that processes are being put in place to foster a culture of impact and maximise the impacts that occur from research (see Box 2-5). There is a recognition that impact needs to be thought about from the outset and throughout the life cycle of research. In some cases, HEIs have raised the profile of impact through its inclusion within their research strategy, or by production of an independent strategy to address it. The level at which the strategies are being put in place varied across the sample, from departments, schools and faculties to an HEI-wide document. Some HEIs are using the experience of preparing the impact template (REF3a) to inform ongoing activities and strategies. Due to the volume of work and time required to put together an impact submission, there is a concern from some that the focus on impact will disappear until the next exercise and thus there is a need to keep impact on the agenda at an HEI level. One way to achieve this is with the production of a visible strategy.

A significant minority of HEIs identified implications for resourcing, retention, promotion and recruitment of personnel within HEIs. These included the creation and retention of impact-related positions, which were fixed-term contracts for the period prior to the REF submission and have now been turned into permanent roles. Interviewees also mentioned the introduction of impact as a criterion and area for consideration within their annual appraisal of staff and that it was being taken into account during recruitment. One interviewee speculated that the biggest effect will be seen on junior colleagues who are ambitious and may see impact as a pathway to promotion and resources.

In specific instances strategies and processes have been, or are being, put in place to 'capture' impact

contemporaneously to ease preparation for future REF exercises (see Box 2-6). There is, though, recognition that this will have an ongoing cost implication that risks reducing resources available for conducting research, producing publications and even facilitating impact.

However, it is important to remember the scale of the culture change that is currently occurring. Some HEIs recognised that this was a broader issue to be addressed, as only a small number of people were involved in the REF preparations and therefore there are 'whole pools of people who have not engaged'. This issue is confirmed in the cost analysis, which shows that in most HEIs only a subset of staff attended training (see Chapter 5).

## 2.4. Caveats and limitations

While the site visit interviews allowed us to explore a wide range of opinions about the REF at a nuanced level, there are disadvantages of this data collection approach. As discussed in Section 2.2.3, contradictory points were often raised within an HEI, as there were multiple interviewees at each site. The statements from interviewees are not necessarily representative of an 'institution' view, but rather of individuals within an institution. To this end we have not quantified the analysis and it is difficult to indicate the weight of evidence about any one point in particular.

The interviewees selected by the HEI were, in some instances, unable to attend the site visit meeting. The sample did not, therefore, have an equal representation of UOAs, although across the HEIs we visited, submission was made to all 36 UOAs and our sample was representative of the submissions of the sector.

Since we employed a semi-structured interview protocol, not all questions were addressed to each interviewee. The site visits were split across the team and therefore different interview styles were used. In order to minimise the effects of this variation, the pairs were

mixed up to ensure that junior researchers worked with all senior researchers and vice versa.

The interviews were written up as a summary of the discussions rather than a verbatim transcript of the conversation and this is one point at which information could have been lost; others are the coding and analysis stages. There were four researchers coding the notes and therefore variations in coding style were visible. We aimed to mitigate the effect of this on the analysis with regular meetings to discuss queries and provide an agreed standard of coding practice.

## Chapter 3 Results from the survey analysis

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### 3.1. Background

In order to supplement the data collected at the HEI site visit interviews, two online surveys were developed. One survey was completed by individuals who had led the drafting of impact case studies (REF3b) and the other was completed by those who had led the impact template drafting (REF3a).

The purpose of these surveys was to ensure that we captured the perspective and views of those who worked directly on the case studies and impact templates and who may not have been present during our site visits. Both perspectives are crucial to informing the evaluation.

This chapter sets out the methodology for the survey and accompanying analysis. We then describe the findings from the survey in detail, addressing both the descriptive statistics (e.g. how many hours authors estimated spending on preparing the documents) and the qualitative analysis of the responses we received.

### 3.2. Approach

The two surveys were developed to capture information about the experiences of the individuals who led the development of the impact case study (REF3b) and impact template (REF3a) documents. HEIs in our sample provided a list of relevant individuals to complete the surveys and their contact details. In most cases this was only one individual per impact case study or impact template, but for some institutions as many as three people were identified as ‘lead authors’. Where this occurred there may have been a division of labour where, for example, one person was the lead academic and another was the lead author, or there may have been a central support/administrative person helping to source evidence or coordinate

production of the document.

The surveys focused specifically on the process of producing the impact documents. They included two main types of questions: 1) questions about different estimates of the amount of resource (e.g. time and people) required to produce the documents and 2) qualitative questions about the benefits and challenges of the process, notable practices employed, and suggestions for improvement. The full survey protocols can be found in Appendices E and F, and included the following topics:

- The number of people involved in preparing the document
- When engagement with the document started and finished
- The estimated length of time taken to prepare the document, by the person answering the survey, and the estimate of the time it took others who contributed
- The three most rewarding things about the process
- The three most challenging things about the process
- Good practice at HE funding body policy and HEI levels
- Suggested improvements at HE funding body policy and HEI levels
- A five-point rating of the scale of the challenge associated with different aspects of the HE funding bodies’ policy criteria and guidance for the impact submission.<sup>26</sup>

Institutions were also given the option to add an additional two to three questions to the survey to request information that might help inform their internal REF assessment processes or future strategy.<sup>27</sup> HEIs who asked additional questions were interested in knowing what participants thought worked well about their HEI’s

<sup>26</sup> The scale rating was only included in the impact case study author survey.

<sup>27</sup> The answers to these questions are not assessed in this report as they were specific to each HEI.

approach to the impact element of the REF, what processes, support or systems would improve preparation for impact in the next REF, and how much administrative support was required to support the development of the impact case study/studies. The survey was open for each HEI for four weeks after the site visit was conducted. Surveys were hosted through SelectSurvey and reminders were sent out both two weeks and one day prior to closure of the survey.<sup>28</sup>

The data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively where appropriate. The analysis of the descriptive statistics was conducted in Microsoft Excel and involved calculating the median and interquartile ranges for the questions addressed.

The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively. Due to the breadth, depth and diversity of views reflected across these responses, they were analysed in a similar manner to the site visits. Thus, while broad analytical categories were developed in relation to the questions that were asked, individual responses to any question may have contained information relevant to any category and would have been coded accordingly. Such an approach was deemed necessary because many responses contained a rich array of reflections, ideas and opinions across the categories and we did not want to lose this diversity of viewpoints. For example, a response to a question about institutional support for case studies might have also included further views about the challenges of producing either the impact case study or impact template documents. In this sense, the unit of analysis was the entirety of an individual's response across the questions. Again, this is consistent with the way HEI site visit data were analysed for this evaluation. However, it does mean there is a risk of some ideas being over-represented and we comment on this further in the caveats and limitations section of this chapter. In order to provide some sense of how the ideas were distributed, we also provide institutional data alongside coded response data. The analytical categories were:

- Benefits of producing the impact case study and impact template documents.
- Challenges of producing the impact case study and impact template documents.
- Notable (or good) practice within the HEI or

aspects of the HE funding council policy that were perceived to work well in relation to the production of the impact submission documents.

- Suggested improvements to practice within the HEI or to the HE funding bodies' policies on the impact submission.

The qualitative data were coded in NVivo and a code book was specifically developed for analysing these data (see Appendix G).<sup>29</sup> The code book allows all ideas about a similar analytical category (e.g. benefits, challenges, etc.) to be grouped together. Thus, once the dataset was organised at the analytical category level, themes within the main analytical categories were further identified, grouped and analysed. For example, each type of challenge respondents noted became a 'theme' within the analysis. Once the thematic coding had been done, notable themes were identified within each category for a final round of detailed textual analysis to identify any nuances or sub-themes that might be relevant to the analysis.<sup>30</sup> In the results presented below we use the following terminology to refer to the qualitative analysis:

- *Analytical categories* refer to the main questions asked in the survey.
- *Themes* refer to the further breakdown of response data within an analytical category (e.g. the type of challenge identified).
- *Ideas* refer to the different opinions reflected within a response, which were coded to a theme within an analytical category.
- *Respondent* refers to the individual who responded to the survey.
- *Responses* refer to the entire response any respondent gave to an individual question. Any one response might contain more than one idea, and thus could have been coded to multiple themes and analytical categories.

### 3.3. Results

The following sections summarise the results from the impact case study and impact template surveys. We first provide a summary of response rates and descriptive statistics from the survey. We then present an analysis of the open-ended questions, highlighting similarities and differences between the two surveys.

<sup>28</sup> SelectSurvey is an online survey tool used by RAND and hosted by the RAND US Information Science and Technology (IST) group. See

<http://selectsurvey.net/>

<sup>29</sup> See Section 1.3.2 for a detailed description of how the NVivo analysis proceeded across all tasks.

<sup>30</sup> A notable theme within a category was indicated by the top five groupings of ideas expressed within a given category.

**Table 3-1: Response rate to the impact case study and impact template surveys**

Type of survey	Number of individuals invited to complete the survey	Number of respondents	Response rate (%)
Impact case study (REF3b)	1793	962	54%
Impact template (REF3a)	456	259	57%

### 3.3.1 Response rates

Across our sample 1,997 impact case studies and 407 impact templates were submitted as part of REF 2014. As summarised in Table 3-1, for the impact case study author survey, 1,793 individuals were identified by the HEIs in our sample and invited to take part. The response rate across all 21 HEIs ranged from 36 per cent to 92 per cent, with a mean response rate of 54 per cent.<sup>31</sup> For the impact template documents, 456 individuals across the 21 HEIs were initially identified as lead authors and were invited to complete the impact template survey.<sup>32</sup> The response rate across all 21 HEIs ranged from 32 per cent to 100 per cent with a mean response rate of 57 per cent.<sup>33</sup>

Some individuals who did not complete the survey contacted the evaluation team to explain why. The reasons for declining to respond fell into the following categories: individuals had left the HEI; they had already invested a significant amount of time in the HEI's REF submission; they were too busy; they were not, in their opinion, the appropriate person to complete the survey; they were sitting on a REF panel and did not feel they should respond; or they did not feel the questions we were asking were appropriate.

### 3.3.2. Descriptive statistics

Resources involved in producing the impact submission documents

Respondents estimated that the median number of academics involved in developing an impact case study was three (interquartile range 2–4). More were involved in the production of the impact template documents, with a median of six people per document (interquartile range 4–10) as shown in Figure 3-1.

Respondents were asked to estimate when preparations of the documentation for submission commenced and ended. They were provided with a sequential series of month/year dates to choose from, starting at July 2011 and going through to November 2013.<sup>34</sup> The start date was chosen because it coincided with the publication of the final guidance from the HE funding bodies for how impact case study and impact template documents should be produced and how they would be assessed, although we recognise some HEIs might have started preparing in a less formal way prior to this. The deadline for submission was 29 November 2013.

The results show that preparation for both documents started across the submission period and the majority finished between September and November 2013 (Figure 3-2). There was a median elapsed time in completing the document of 18 months for impact case studies (interquartile range 12–24 months) and 17

<sup>31</sup> Due to issues of confidentiality and the need to provide anonymity for survey respondents, we were unable to link respondents to specific UOAs and therefore could not provide any systematic analysis of non-response rates across the sample.

<sup>32</sup> There is not a 1:1 relationship between the number of impact case studies and impact templates submitted and the number of individuals invited to complete the surveys. This is because in some instances one individual led on more than one impact case study or impact template. In other cases the HEI could not identify a single lead and more than one individual was contacted to complete the survey about a single document. There was also a degree of overlap between the individuals who were responsible for producing the impact case study and impact template documents. Therefore some were asked to complete both surveys.

<sup>33</sup> Throughout this chapter we will refer to the impact case study (REF3b) data in tables, figures and text before the impact template data (REF3a). Although this is not consistent with the alphabetical ordering of the documents, the main weighting and emphasis of the submission, and hence the data from our evaluation, was on the impact case study.

<sup>34</sup> Some respondents from eight HEIs in our sample were initially given an open-ended text box to respond to this question. This resulted in a range of unstandardized responses which were difficult to analyse across the sample. We therefore provided a standardised option to respondents at the final thirteen HEIs to receive the survey. Where respondents from the initial group gave a start date prior to July 2011, it was standardised to July 2011.

Figure 3-1: Number of academics involved in the development of an impact case study (REF3b) and impact template (REF3a)

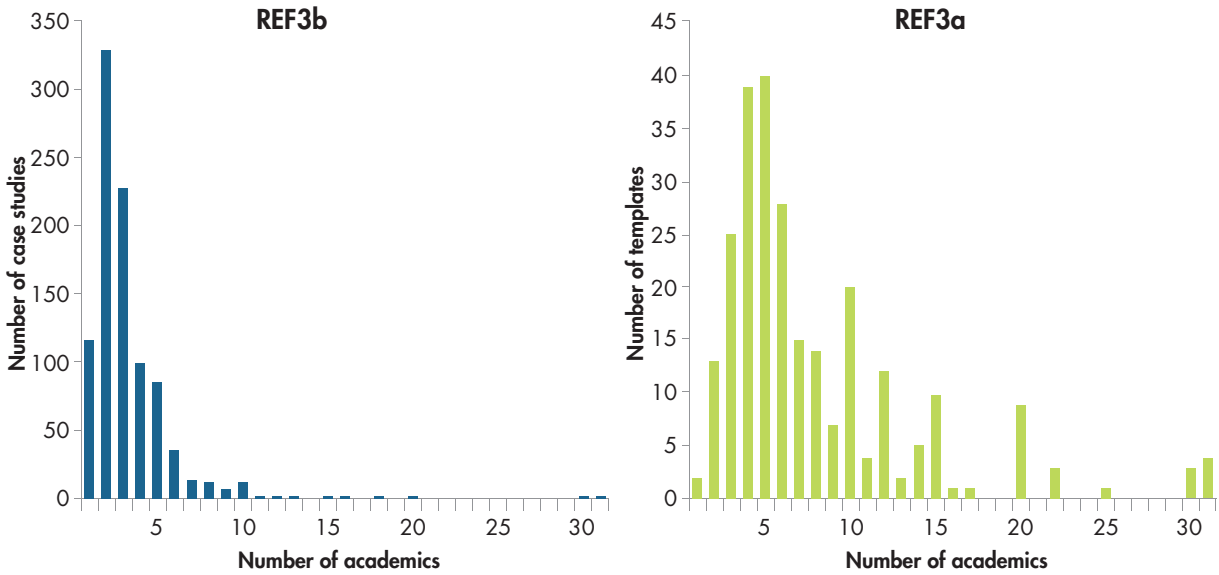


Figure 3-2: Commencement and completion of preparations for impact case studies (REF3b) and impact templates (REF3a)

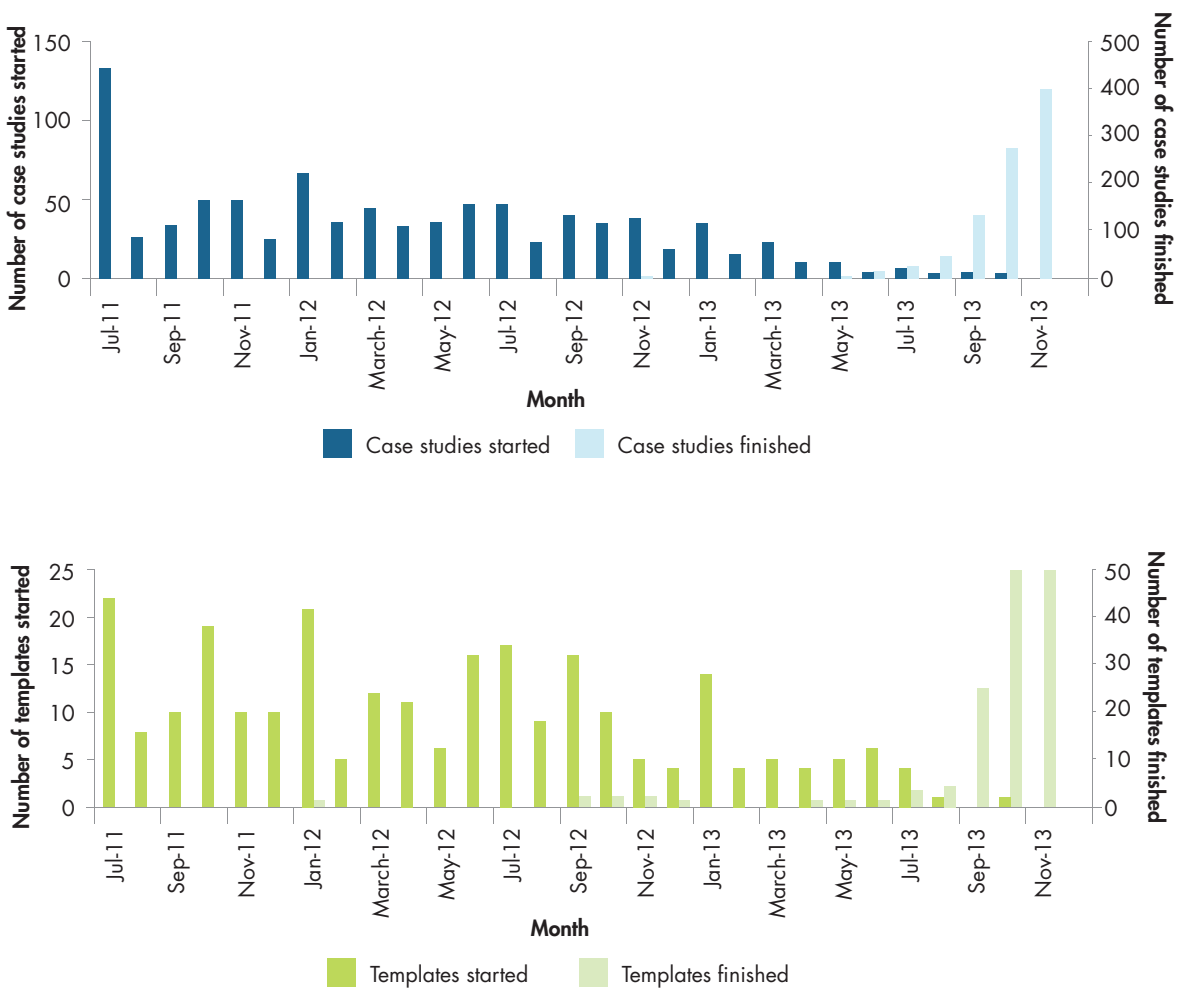




Figure 3-3: Elapsed time taken to prepare impact case study (REF3b) and impact template (REF3a) documents

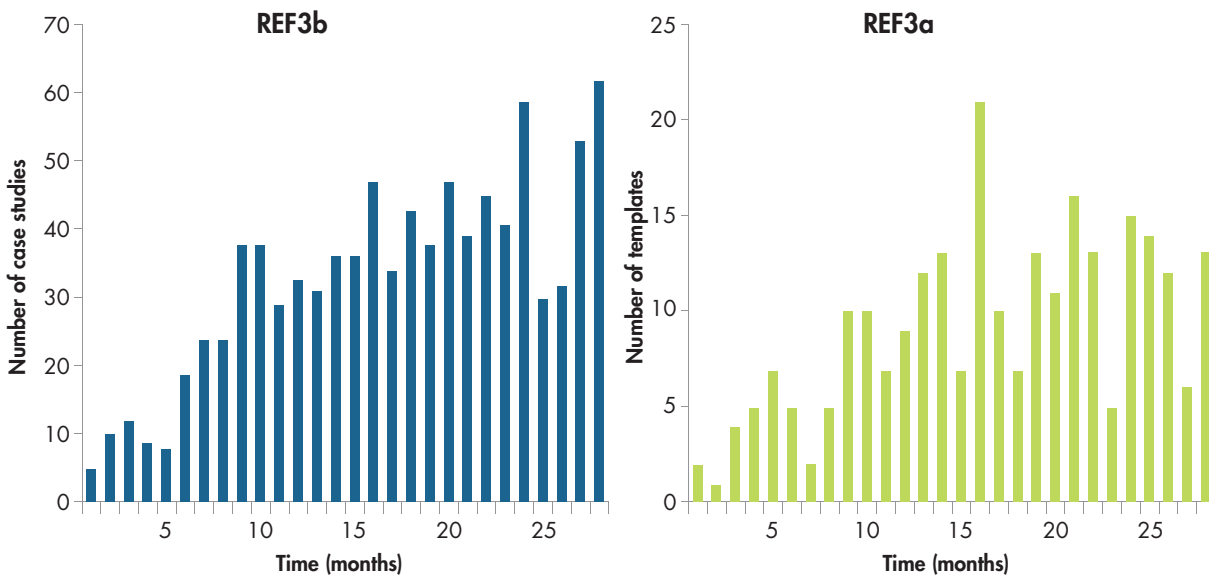
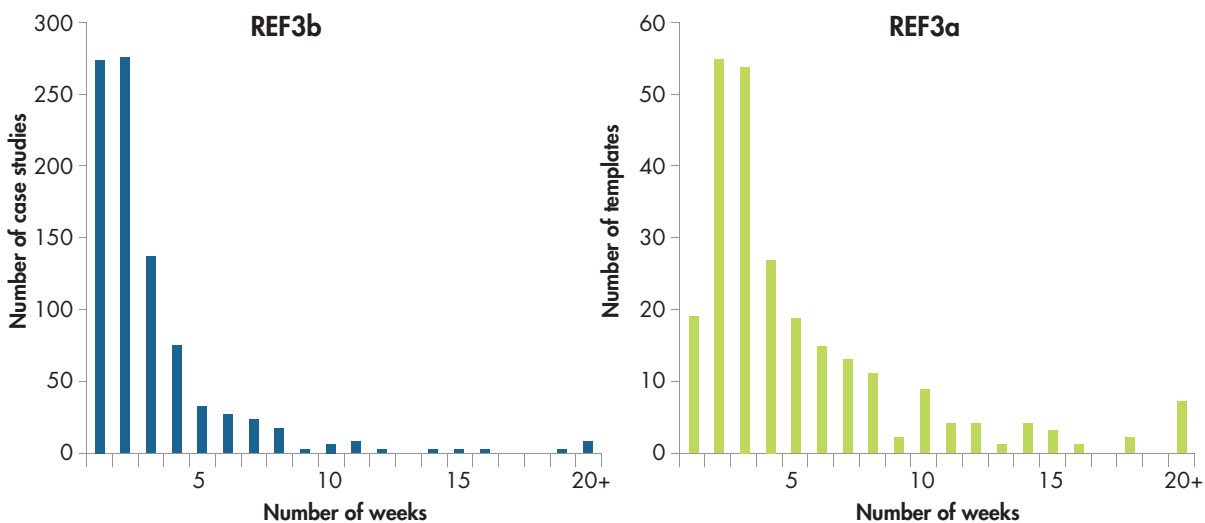


Figure 3-4: Total time taken to prepare an impact case study (REF3b) and impact template (REF3a)



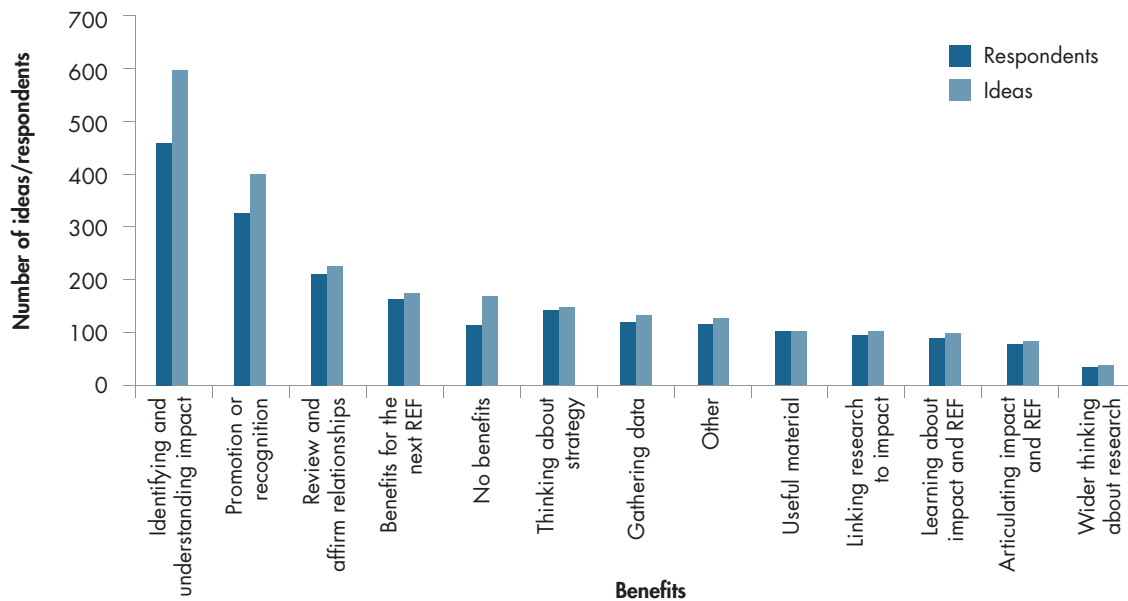
months for impact templates (interquartile range 12–23 months) (Figure 3-3).

Respondents were then asked to estimate the time that they had spent developing the documentation as well as the time others had spent. In order to arrive at an estimate of the length of time spent per impact submission document, we added the total number of hours each impact case study and impact template lead au-

thor estimated they spent preparing the document to the number of hours they estimated others spent on the work. On average, respondents estimated that it took approximately 8.5 days to produce an impact case study (interquartile range 4–15 days) and 14.5 days to produce an impact template (interquartile range 9–29 days) (Figure 3-4). These figures were collected in hours and converted into weeks, assuming a 7.5 hour working day, and five working days in a week (Figure 3-4).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> These were the figures used for the cost estimation (see Chapter 5) and so were kept consistent for this analysis.

Figure 3-5: Benefits identified in preparing impact case studies (REF3b)



When considering the number of people engaged in developing a single document, the median number of hours engaged in production of the submission per person was 20 hours (interquartile range 11–42 hours) for impact case studies and 17.5 hours (interquartile range 9–37 hours) for impact templates. However, the time burden as estimated by the lead author(s) was not shared evenly. On average, lead authors estimated that they accounted for 73.5 per cent of the total time invested in the impact case studies and 66.6 per cent of the time taken to produce an impact template.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that the bulk of the time spent on both documents was concentrated in one individual.

It is important to remember that these figures are estimates and were made by the person(s) designated as ‘lead author(s)’ by the HEI. Accurate figures would require detailed time-keeping by respondents during the production process. It would also require individuals to be fully aware of all elements of the process, which we could not necessarily assume to be the case, particularly as some people explicitly mentioned this in their survey responses. Because of this, information about time taken was also gathered at a central level (see Chapter 5). A comparison of the two estimates shows that HEIs estimated case studies to be twice as time consuming as the authors did, whereas estimates for

impact templates were similar. This reveals the different perceptions held between lead authors and central staff. Though we cannot say definitively what caused this difference, one explanation could be that individual impact case study authors may not have been as aware of the entire process that went into preparing the case study, or else that those with a central perspective may have overestimated the amount of time case study authors were spending at a UOA level.

### 3.3.3. Benefits of developing the impact submission

In this section we discuss the ideas mentioned by respondents when asked to identify the three main benefits of developing either of the two impact submission documents.

For the impact case study survey there were 2,405 ideas regarding benefits and for the impact template survey there were 718.<sup>37</sup> Both sets of responses were coded to the same code book (see Appendix G) and we created 13 themes to represent the different types of benefits. The distribution of ideas about benefits across all 13 themes is provided in Figure 3-5 and Figure 3-6, along with the respondent data for each theme.

<sup>36</sup> Estimations varied from 3–100 per cent for impact case studies and 14–97 per cent for impact templates.

<sup>37</sup> None of the questions in the survey was mandatory and this equates to a mean of 2.5 responses per respondent for both the impact case study and impact template surveys.

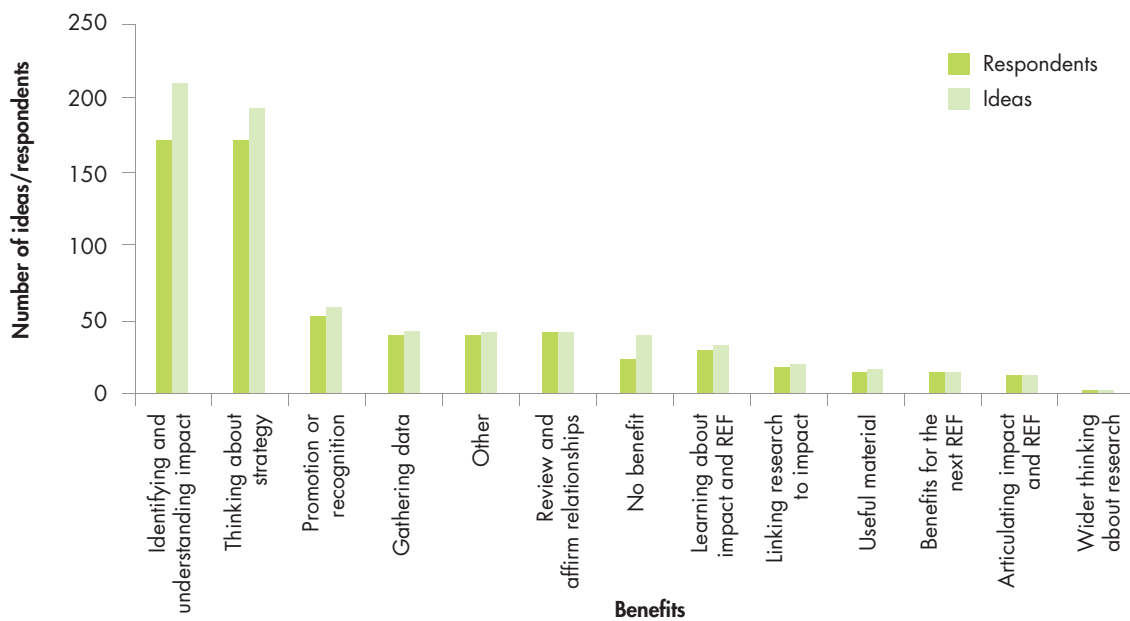
There were some similarities between the benefits of developing either the impact case studies or the impact templates, but different elements emerged as more or less important across the two surveys. A comparison of the top five benefits for the two surveys is given in Table 3-2. The percentage of total respondents is given next to the data about ideas; we also provide the institutional spread of respondents and ideas to reflect how frequently

across institutions the idea was mentioned. Each of the main benefits is discussed in further detail below.

#### Benefit: identifying and understanding impact

The most frequently cited benefit in both the impact case study and impact template surveys was being able to identify and understand the impact of research. Not only was

**Figure 3-6: Benefits identified in preparing impact templates (REF3a)**



**Table 3-2: Top benefits identified in preparing impact case studies (REF3b) and impact templates (REF3a)**

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Types of benefit	% of total ideas about benefits (n=2405)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Types of benefit	% of total ideas about benefits (n=718)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
Identifying and understanding impact	25%	48%	21	Identifying and understanding impact	29%	66%	20
Promotion or recognition	17%	33%	21	Thinking about strategy	27%	66%	20
Review and affirm relationships	9%	22%	21	Promotion and recognition	8%	20%	19
Benefits for the next REF	7%	17%	21	Gathering data	6%	15%	14
No benefits	7%	12%	20	No benefits	6%	15%	9

this the most frequently identified benefit, but nearly half of the respondents mentioned it in the impact case study survey and two-thirds of the respondents highlighted it in the impact template survey. For the impact case study, respondents stated that the process ‘focused [their] mind on what the main impacts of [their] work’ were, helped them to ‘discover the extent of impact’, and led to ‘understanding how impact worked in practice’. For the impact templates, individuals commented on the value of being able to identify and document what impacts had led from the research they or their faculty had been involved in. The process provided them with a ‘better understanding of the impact of [their] research’ and ‘highlight[ed] the broader way in which [their] research had impacted on society, sometimes quite unexpectedly’.

#### Benefit: promotion and recognition

Some 17 per cent of the ideas about benefits in the impact case study survey, mentioned by one-third of respondents, were about promotion and recognition of individuals, research areas and institutions. Respondents felt that it gave their own work ‘visibility in the uni[versity]’ and ‘raised [my] profile slightly’ within the HEI. Other respondents noted that the process had enabled their department or institution to be more widely recognised as it ‘enhance[d] the reputation’ and the ‘status for the university’.

Fewer respondents (20 per cent) felt this was a benefit of preparing the impact template documents. Some individuals commented that the process enabled the value of their own work to be recognised by colleagues, within the HEI, to funders and to society. Others spoke of the wider promotional value of the process for their UOA, department or HEI as it helped to gain ‘recognition within the university for the work of [their] group’.

#### Benefit: review and affirm relationships

In the impact case study survey, 9 per cent of the ideas about benefits (mentioned by 22 per cent of respondents) highlighted that the process helped to review and affirm relationships. Over a third of these references were specifically about the benefits to relationships with research users, with individuals noting that the process ‘further developed [their] contact with those [they] impacted’ and helped to build up a ‘stronger relationship with users’. Others noted a benefit to relationships with research collaborators or to relationships within the HEI.

#### Benefit: thinking about strategy and gathering data

Two-thirds of respondents to the impact template survey (27 per cent of ideas) mentioned the opportunity to think about strategy, both for individual researchers and for their department or institution. Some individuals stated that the process ‘helped [them] develop more impactful future project plans’ and others noted that it helped them to ‘think carefully about future plans for generating impact’ in regards to ‘clarifying the future impact strategy for the unit’.

In addition to thinking about strategy, 6 per cent of the ideas about the impact templates highlighted the benefit of gathering data to inform the impact template document. Many felt that useful evidence had been found that ‘[they] would not collect otherwise’ and that it provided an ‘opportunity to collate information and identify links not previously thought about’. Respondents also said that since evidence was collected in a standard form it enabled ‘information on individual contributions [to be aggregated] to the overall impact profile of the department’.

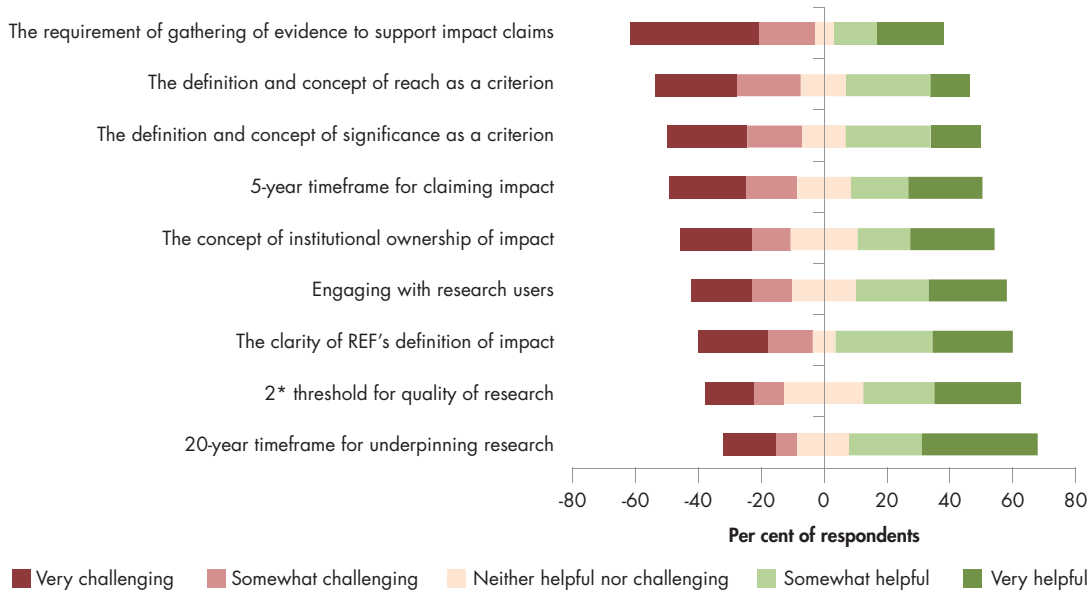
### 3.3.4. Challenges of developing the impact submission

Impact case study authors were asked to assess to what extent specific aspects of the guidance were either helpful or challenging in producing their case studies. As can be seen in Figure 3-7, the majority of respondents (53 per cent) felt that the guidance related to the requirement of gathering evidence to support the impact case studies was either somewhat or very challenging. This is consistent with our overall findings that the gathering of evidence was one of the most challenging and burdensome aspects of the impact submission (see Section 3.2 of the accompanying report *Findings and observations*). Following this, both the definition and concept of ‘reach’ and ‘significance’ as key criteria for analysis of impact were also seen as somewhat or very challenging (38 per cent and 37 per cent, respectively), again in line with our finding that understanding what was meant by impact and how it would be assessed was another main challenge.

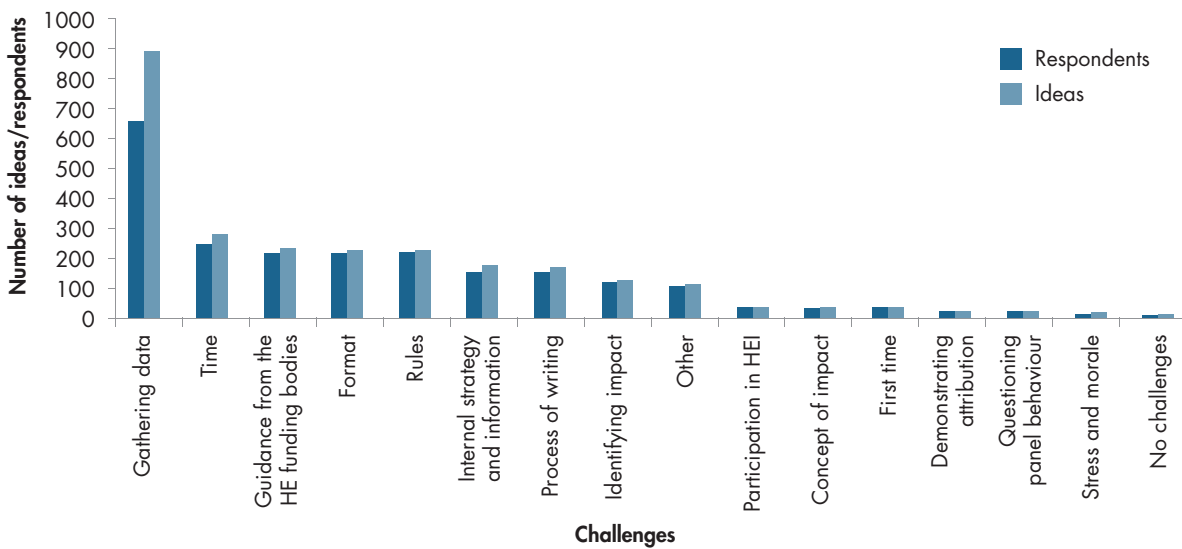
Respondents were also asked to list the three most challenging things about developing the impact case studies and impact template. There were 2,649 ideas identified for the impact case studies and 755 ideas for the impact templates.<sup>38</sup> The different types of challenges experienced by respondents were grouped into 16 themes, as shown in Figure 3-8 and Figure 3-9.

<sup>38</sup> As discussed above, none of the questions was mandatory and respondents provided an average of 2.4 responses about challenges associated with preparing impact case studies and 2.6 responses for the impact templates.

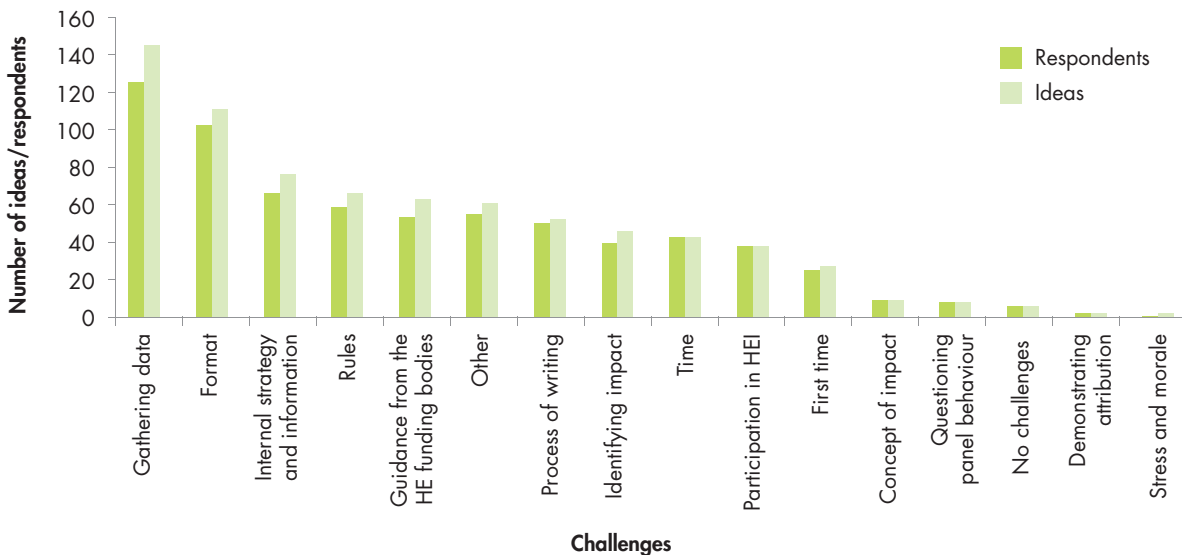
**Figure 3-7: Impact case study authors' opinions on the helpfulness or challenging nature of various aspects of the guidance on impact submissions**



**Figure 3-8: Challenges identified in preparing impact case studies (REF3b)**



**Figure 3-9: Challenges identified in preparing impact templates (REF3a)**



As can be seen in Table 3-3, the five challenges most referenced in the impact case study survey were those of gathering evidence, the pressures of time to complete the document, the rules, the format and the guidance provided by the HE funding bodies. Respondents to the impact template survey most frequently identified gathering evidence as a challenge, followed by issues with the format of the document, articulation of internal strategy and gathering of information, the rules for assessing the impact templates, and the guidance provided by the HE funding bodies.

#### Challenge: gathering data

The impact case study survey results indicate that the most frequently mentioned challenge (68 per cent respondents) was associated with the process of gathering data and other evidence. Respondents commented that it was hard to ‘get information retrospectively’, and to ‘generate the supporting data in a clear and succinct way’. Specific examples of where gathering evidence was difficult included persuading ‘industrial research collaborators to share commercially sensitive data to demonstrate impact’ as they did not wish to ‘put a financial impact in writing’; international cases where it was difficult to collate ‘evidence of impact from around the world’; and instances where there was a need to obtain ‘documentary evidence of intangible impacts’.

Nearly half of the respondents to the impact template survey highlighted the challenge of gathering evidence. Individuals noted that because it was done retrospectively there was ‘no existing data to properly evidence infrastructure in terms of metrics’ and that the ‘time involved in gathering the data’ was demanding given ‘a lack of support in collecting raw information’.

#### Challenge: time taken and format

The second most frequently mentioned challenge of the impact case studies was the time taken to write them, although this was only mentioned by 25 per cent of respondents. It was noted that the task was ‘time consuming and demanding to do properly’, and that it ‘subtracted a significant amount of time from more central academic duties, such as research’.

Only 9 per cent of the ideas regarding the challenges of preparing the impact case study focused on the format of the case study document itself, though this was mentioned by almost a quarter of all respondents. The main challenge here was associated with the structure of the document. Respondents said that it was hard to keep ‘the study within the page limit’ and that it ‘was difficult to decide what information to leave out’. Writing style was also linked to the format of the document and respondents noted that it was not only challenging to ‘make it interesting to read’ but also to articulate ‘impact

**Table 3-3: Top challenges identified in producing impact case studies (REF3b) and impact templates (REF3a)**

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Types of challenges	% of total ideas about challenges (n=2649)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Types of challenges	% of total ideas about challenges (n=755)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
Gathering data	34%	68%	21	Gathering data	19%	48%	18
Time	11%	26%	20	Format	15%	39%	19
Rules	9%	23%	20	Internal strategy and information	10%	25%	18
Format	9%	22%	19	Rules	9%	23%	20
Guidance from the HE funding bodies	9%	22%	19	Guidance from the HE funding bodies	8%	21%	16

in the terms, language and narrative form required by the REF exercise’.

The challenges of the document format were also mentioned by over one-third of the respondents to the impact template survey. Nearly three-quarters of the ideas about format specifically highlighted difficulties fitting the information into the template and structuring it in the correct way. The writing style needed for the document was also mentioned, as some respondents said they were ‘unaccustomed’ to it, which meant they had to ‘learn how to write in the required style’. Some respondents were confused by the difference between the environment template (REF5) and the impact template. One respondent stated that it was hard ‘to separate what should go in the REF3a, what should go in the REF5 and manage cross-references’ and suggested that perhaps it ‘would have been much better to have just one document’.

Challenge: rules and guidance from the HE funding bodies

Some 9 per cent of the ideas regarding the challenges of the impact case studies (mentioned by 23 per cent of respondents) were about the rules for how impact case studies needed to be prepared and criteria for how they would be assessed. When these ideas were analysed, over a third of them were related to the definition of impact. Respondents noted problems in understanding what was meant by impact, and ‘agreeing on what constitutes impact’ within a ‘restrictive definition’. Respondents found it challenging to link research and impact, and they found it hard ‘connecting specific impacts to specific activities and specific pieces of research’. There were also concerns about the impact and research timeframes, as it was felt that both these windows introduced ‘artificiality’ and it was difficult to ‘identify demonstrable impacts within the timescales available’.

Some 23 per cent of respondents to the impact template survey also highlighted the challenges of the rules. Nearly two-thirds (n=39) of their ideas related specifically to the definition of impact. Respondents stated that they found it hard to ‘understand what “impact” meant for the REF’.

Guidance from the funding bodies was identified as being the fourth and fifth most significant challenge for the impact case studies and impact templates respectively. Respondents across both surveys commented on a ‘lack of clarity as to what was required’, that it was hard to get ‘proper clear instructions at an early stage of the process’, and reported frustration that ‘REF details [came] out late in the process’ and that they felt a ‘sense

of policy being made on the hoof’.

Challenge: internal strategy and availability of information

Finally, 10 per cent of the ideas about the impact templates (mentioned by 25 per cent of respondents) were focussed on the challenge of articulating an HEI’s internal impact strategy and providing information to support it. In some instances respondents noted that they not only found the lack of institutional support and conflicting feedback and information challenging, but that it was also difficult to define a strategy ‘for which there was little if any precedent’.

### 3.3.5. Suggested improvements to the process of developing impact submissions within HEIs

Respondents were asked what three things they would like to have been improved within their HEI regarding the preparation for the REF 2014 impact assessment. There were 952 ideas identified in response to this question in the impact case study survey and 276 ideas in the impact template survey. These ideas were coded to seven themes in order to identify the different types of improvements suggested (see Figure 3-10 and Figure 3-11). As Table 3-4 shows, the most frequently mentioned ideas in both surveys were about requests for increased internal support and the need for a clearer impact strategy.

Suggested improvements within HEIs: increase internal support

Over a third of ideas in the impact case study survey (37 per cent, mentioned by 36 per cent of respondents) suggested that the HEI preparation process could be improved through increased internal support. Over half of these ideas discussed the need for more guidance from the HEI, including a ‘better understanding of what is required [and] clearer and more consistent advice’; a third of these ideas included suggestions about making more resources available to authors, such as having ‘available people to help with gathering evidence – they could be hired centrally to help across several departments’; ‘access to funding for impact work’; and ‘a unit dedicated to impact auditing support’. One respondent suggested that there could be ‘more extensive involvement of people who don’t teach or do research in HE’, whilst another suggested there was a need for ‘all staff buy into the process’. Some respondents also highlighted that HEIs could give time off in lieu of time spent preparing the impact case studies as it had taken such a long time:

Figure 3-10: Suggested improvements that HEIs could make in preparing impact case studies (REF3b)

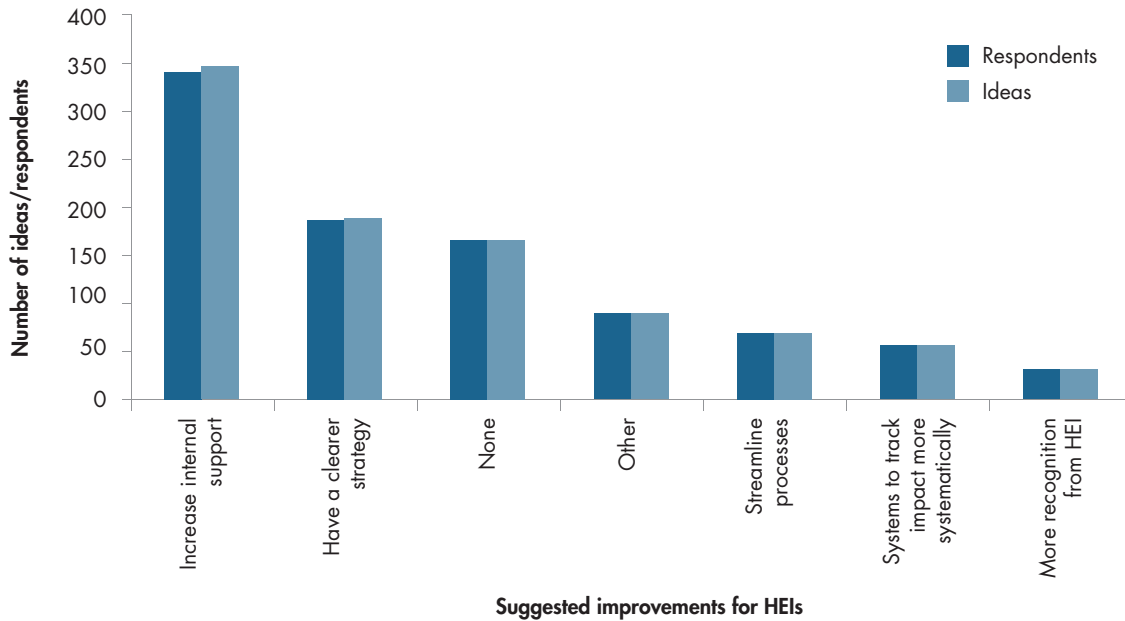
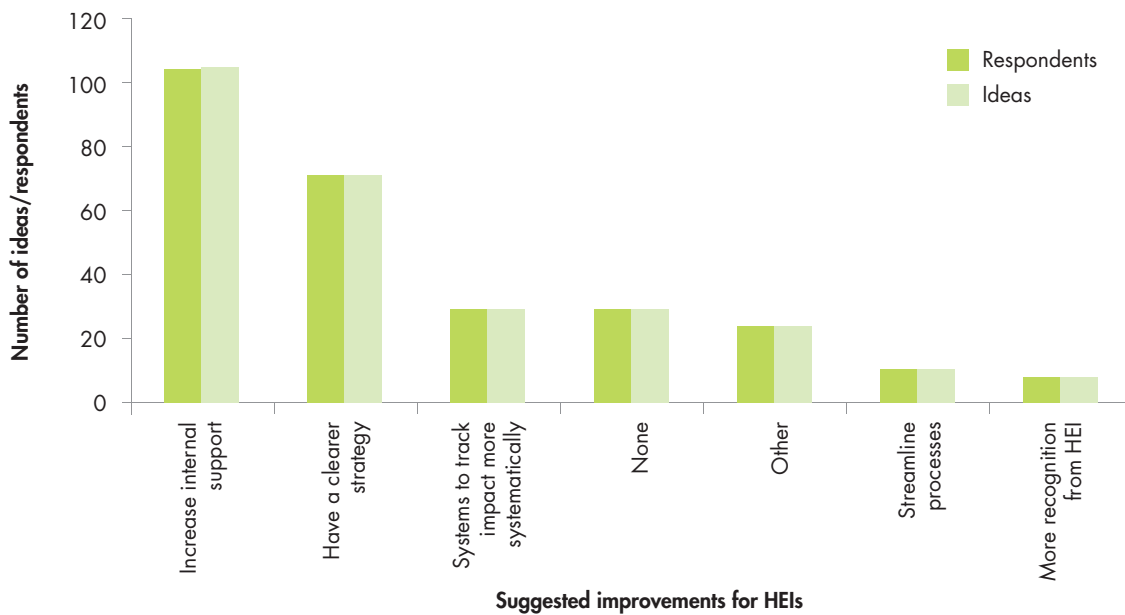


Figure 3-11: Suggested improvements that HEIs could make in preparing impact templates (REF3a)



*[There should be] more support for impact case study authors, including teaching relief; [as] taken together, delivering the impact case study is a considerable additional burden.*

Over a third of the ideas (38 per cent, mentioned by 40 per cent of respondents) about the impact templates also highlighted the need to increase internal support within HEIs. Over half of these ideas specifically identified the need for additional resource. Respondents wrote about ‘need[ing] dedicated resources to bear the REF admin burden next time, so that key people are not taken from the front line’, which ‘was very damaging’. They also

mentioned the need to support ‘evidence collection’ with ‘[the] appointment of [central support] to log impacts over time’ and ‘more resources dedicated to funding impact work’. Just under a third of the ideas about increased internal support suggested the need for greater guidance, as illustrated in the following response:

*There was very little guidance from my institution... [I] was individually asked to come up with impact templates and then, eventually, the university provided some guidance/ideas but this would have been helpful at an earlier stage.*



Table 3-4: Top suggested improvements for developing the impact element of the submission within HEIs

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Types of improvements for HEIs	% of total ideas about improvements (n=952)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Types of improvements for HEIs	% of total ideas about improvements (n=276)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
Increase internal support	37%	36%	20	Increase internal support	38%	40%	18
Have a clearer strategy	20%	20%	21	Have a clearer strategy	26%	27%	19
None	18%	17%	21	None	11%	11%	5
Other	9%	9%	17	Systems to track impact more systematically	11%	11%	15
Streamline processes	7%	4%	15	Other	9%	9%	10

Others suggested that better engagement and involvement of more staff in the process would be beneficial. Here, improvements could be made by ‘getting a greater involvement of academics in terms of numbers, so as to be less reliant on a small number of big projects’ and ‘making more use of internal people’, including more senior figures.

In order to explore whether there was any relationship between survey respondents’ views about increased central support and the actual level of central support that might have been provided by the HEI, after the site visits had been conducted the two researchers who conducted each site visit independently assessed their impression of the level of central support. This was then mapped to provide three groups of HEIs: those which we perceived to have a low, medium and high level of central support. Respondents to both surveys from HEIs that were perceived to have low or medium levels of central support had a slightly higher percentage of comments about the need for greater internal support for the next REF (Figure 3-12).

Suggested improvements within HEIs: have a clearer strategy

Over a fifth of the impact case study survey ideas and a quarter of the ideas in the impact template survey

regarding suggested improvements to HEIs’ preparation process were about having a clearer research and impact strategy in place. Respondents said that the preparation process would be improved if they had a ‘clear strategy about how [the HEI] might resource success’ and ‘a full strategy in place earlier in the cycle’. A clear research and impact strategy ‘needs to be articulated and operationalised earlier in the cycle’ and this would make it ‘easier to develop strategic plans for future impact in [their] units, if the university had a clearer approach’.

Suggested improvements within HEIs: streamline processes and introduce systems to track impact more systematically

Some respondents (4 per cent) felt that HEIs could streamline the impact case study preparations. One noted that:

*The whole process seemed to drag on for a very long time. [We] submitted a draft but then it was several months before [we] received feedback. [We] revised the case study and resubmitted it but then there was again a long delay before [we] heard back.*

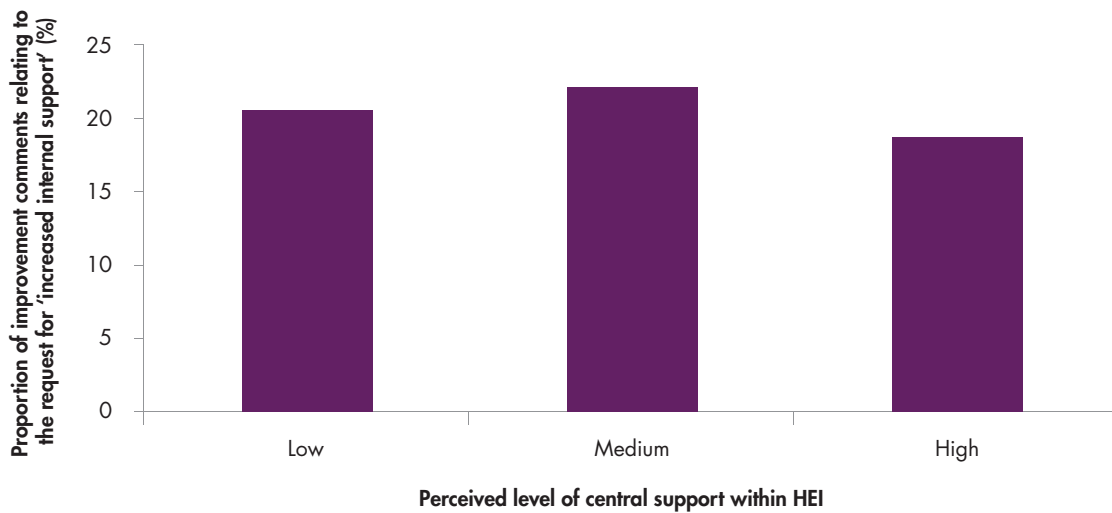
Other respondents suggested that ‘fewer individuals looking at the assessment’ could help lead to ‘fewer it-

erations’ and fewer situations where there were multiple, but slightly conflicting inputs to the process. One way to help streamline the process could be the implementation of systems to track evidence and impact more systematically, as was mentioned in one-third of the ideas about improvements for the impact templates. Respondents noted the potential benefits of having ‘systematic gathering of data on activities and funding provided’ so that ‘evidence capture [is] hardwired into project management mechanisms’ allowing data to be ‘easily accessible’.

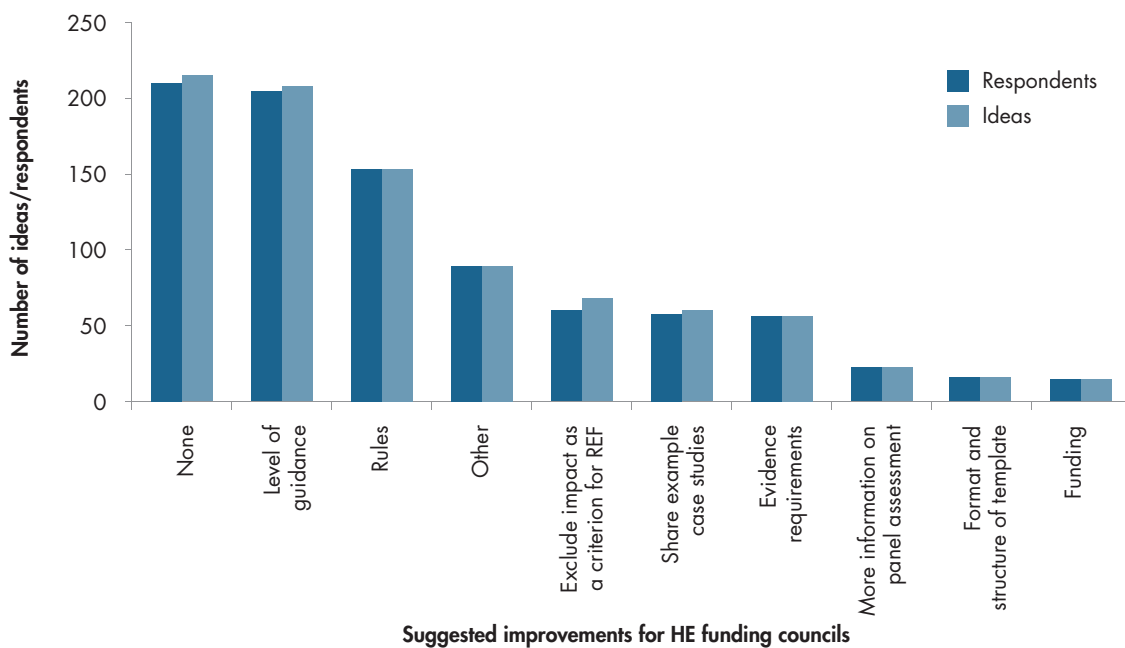
### 3.3.6. Suggested improvements for HE funding councils to consider when planning subsequent exercises

To inform future exercises, respondents were asked what three things they would like to have seen improved about the preparation of the impact element of the REF 2014 submission. There were 901 ideas in the impact case study survey in reference to this question and 252 ideas in the impact template survey. These references were coded to ten themes about the different types of improvements (see Figure 3-13 and Figure 3-14).

**Figure 3-12: Share of all ‘suggested improvement’ ideas across both the impact case study (REF3b) and the impact template (REF3a) surveys relating to increased internal support**



**Figure 3-13: Suggested improvements that HE funding councils could make to the process of preparing impact case studies (REF3b)**



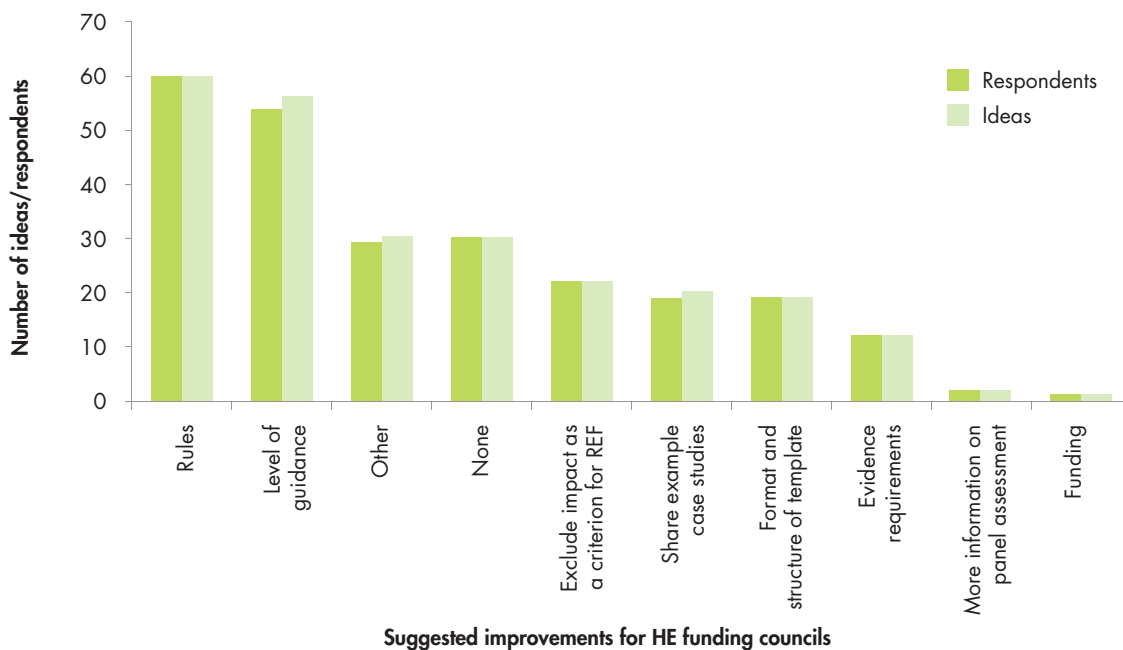
As Table 3-5 shows, the most frequently mentioned ideas were related to the levels of guidance provided. There were also many ideas across both surveys about improvements to the rules covering assessment criteria that could be made. The third and fourth most referenced ideas either offered no suggestions, or were classified as 'other' (as there were mixed responses), while the fifth most frequently suggested idea, though mentioned by less than

10 per cent of respondents for both impact case studies and impact templates, was that the HE funding bodies should exclude impact as a criterion for the REF.

Suggested improvements for HE funding councils: level of guidance and criteria

Over a quarter of the ideas in this analytical category from 22 per cent of impact case study survey

**Figure 3-14: Suggested improvements that HE funding councils could make to the process of preparing impact templates (REF3a)**



**Table 3-5: Top suggested improvements that HE funding councils could make to the process of preparing the impact element of the submission**

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Types of improvements for HE funding councils	% of total ideas about improvements (n=901)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Types of improvements for HE funding councils	% of total ideas about improvements (n=252)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
None	24%	22%	20	Rules	24%	23%	16
Level of guidance	23%	21%	20	Level of guidance	22%	21%	18
Rules	17%	16%	18	None	12%	12%	16
Other	10%	9%	19	Other	12%	11%	13
Exclude impact as a criterion for REF	8%	6%	14	Exclude impact as a criterion for REF	9%	8%	10

respondents were about the level of guidance provided. There were suggestions that the guidance and the definitions used needed to be ‘much clearer’, ‘more precise’, and more concrete ‘earlier in the process’ as ‘impact case studies require a long lead-in time’. Respondents also suggested that it would be beneficial to have a ‘clearer exposition on precisely how the impact case study will be evaluated’. Respondents to the impact template survey also noted that improvements could be made to the level of guidance provided (23 per cent of ideas, 21 per cent of respondents). Respondents highlighted that it could be ‘more subject focused’, ‘unchanging’ and provide ‘more clarity on type of information expected in the various subsections’.

For both the impact case studies and the impact templates, respondents frequently mentioned ideas about improving the criteria against which case studies are developed and assessed. Over half of these ideas for both the impact case studies and impact templates were specifically about improving the definition of impact. For example, one respondent commented that the HE funding councils ‘need to embrace the spirit of diverse impacts and recognise that many are not easy to demonstrate via quantitative evidence’. Another pointed out:

*[It] would be useful to have a much clearer and more nuanced policy which recognises the complexity and diversity of impact, with a much greater emphasis on qualitative impact and innovation.*

Others discussed the research and impact timeframes, where it was felt that the ‘insistence on impacts limited to the recent past was an artificial constraint’ and that

‘more thought needs to be given to more reasonable inclusion criteria. A 20-year cut-off for time [from research] to impact is completely unreasonable’.

Suggested improvements for HE funding councils: exclude impact as a criterion for REF

Less than 10 per cent of respondents in both surveys identified excluding impact from future REF assessments as an idea for improving the process. Impact case study survey respondents said that there should be a ‘reconsideration of whether the policy is worthwhile’. One respondent suggested:

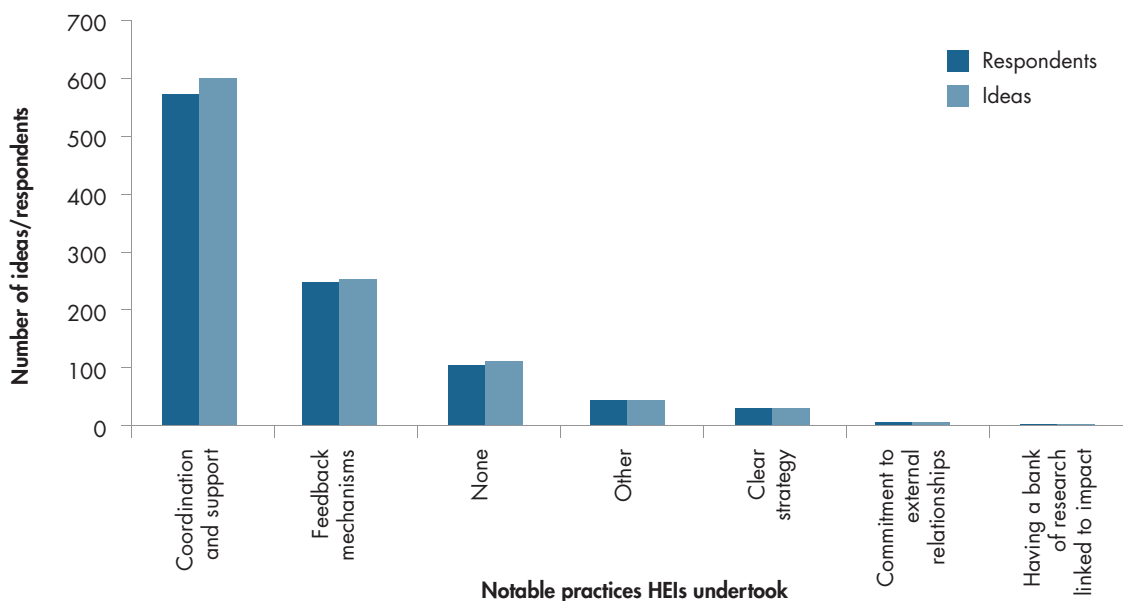
*[HE funding councils should] reduce what is required to allow more time to get on with doing the research [as] a significant amount of precious research time has been wasted on this task this year.*

Other respondents stated that ‘measuring impact is enormously time consuming and comes at the expense of time for innovation and the mind-set for innovative thinking’ and that funding councils should ‘diminish the significance of impact or remove it altogether’.

### 3.3.7. Good practice for HEIs preparing for the impact element of the submission

Respondents were asked to identify good practice within their HEI when preparing for the impact case studies and impact templates. In the impact case study survey there were a total of 1056 ideas regarding good practice within the HEI, and there were 310 in the impact template survey. All references were coded to seven themes in

Figure 3-15: Good practice within HEIs in preparing impact case studies (REF3b)



order to distinguish between the different types of good practice identified (see Figure 3-15 and Figure 3-16).

Table 3-6 shows the main results in summary form. Respondents from both surveys most frequently mentioned the value of having sound coordination and support within their HEI, followed by having feedback mechanisms in place.

Good practice within HEIs: coordination and support

Over half of the ideas (57 per cent, mentioned by 60 per cent of respondents) regarding good practice in preparing impact case studies were about having good coordination and support. Respondents noted that they found ‘dedicated [central support]’, the provision of ‘independent writing expertise’, and ‘support by way of funding... to enhance impact’ helpful in supporting

Figure 3-16: Good practice within HEIs in preparing impact templates (REF3a)

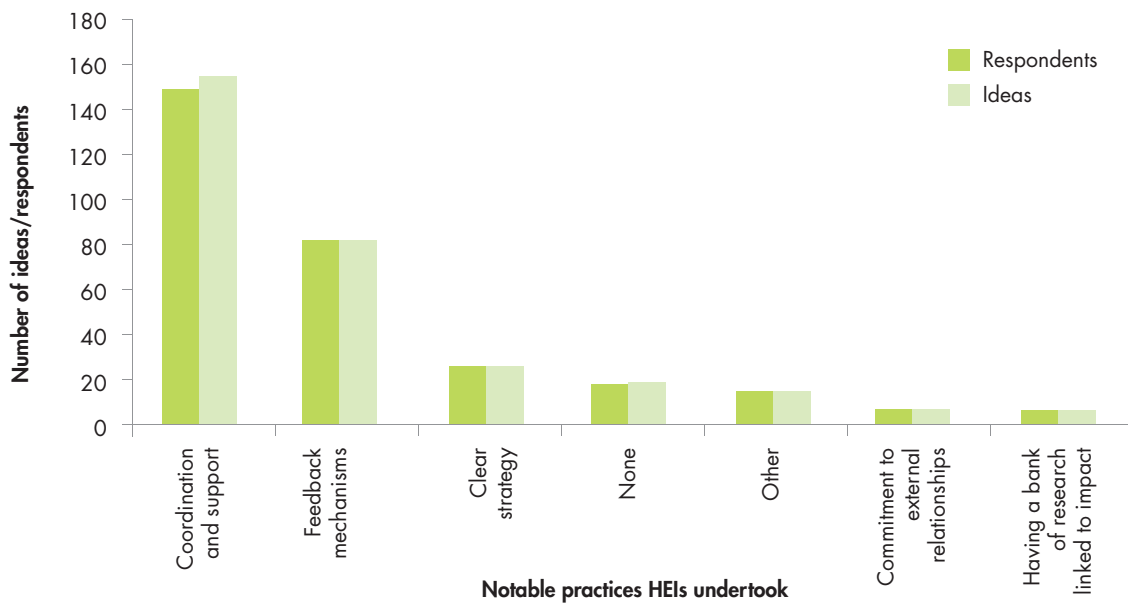


Table 3-6: Top good practices within HEIs in preparing the impact element of the submission

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Types of good practice for HEIs	% of total ideas about good practice (n=1056)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Types of good practice for HEIs	% of total ideas about good practice (n=310)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
Coordination and support	57%	60%	20	Coordination and support	50%	58%	20
Feedback mechanisms	24%	26%	19	Feedback mechanisms	26%	32%	19
None	11%	11%	19	Clear strategy	8%	10%	12
Other	4%	5%	15	None	6%	7%	8
Clear strategy	3%	3%	14	Other	5%	6%	8

their preparations. Centralised support in particular kept one individual ‘encouraged and working to a time plan’, while another felt that ‘strategic support from [senior figures in the department] and general support from [central staff]’ was very helpful.

When asked what practice worked well when preparing for the impact templates half the ideas and 58 per cent of respondents stated that they found good coordination and support within the HEI beneficial. Respondents counted the following as good practice in relation to central coordination and support:

- Informed, balanced advice from a central team, with constructive and timely feedback on drafts as well as full engagement in meetings and practical input whenever required.
- Collaboration between senior colleagues.
- Assistance from [senior committees] in the institution.
- Excellent assistance from the [central offices].

Good practice within HEIs: feedback mechanisms

Close to a quarter of the ideas in both surveys regarding good practice were about having a feedback mechanism in place within the HEI. Respondents said that ‘specific individuals were available to provide advice and guidance, including help with how to write the case study in the way that best demonstrated impact’. Feedback ‘undoubtedly strengthened [the impact case study] by frequent reflections’ and being involved in ‘reading of examples from other disciplines/UOAs early in the process’ also helped improve one’s own case study.

Similar comments were made about the feedback provided on the impact templates.

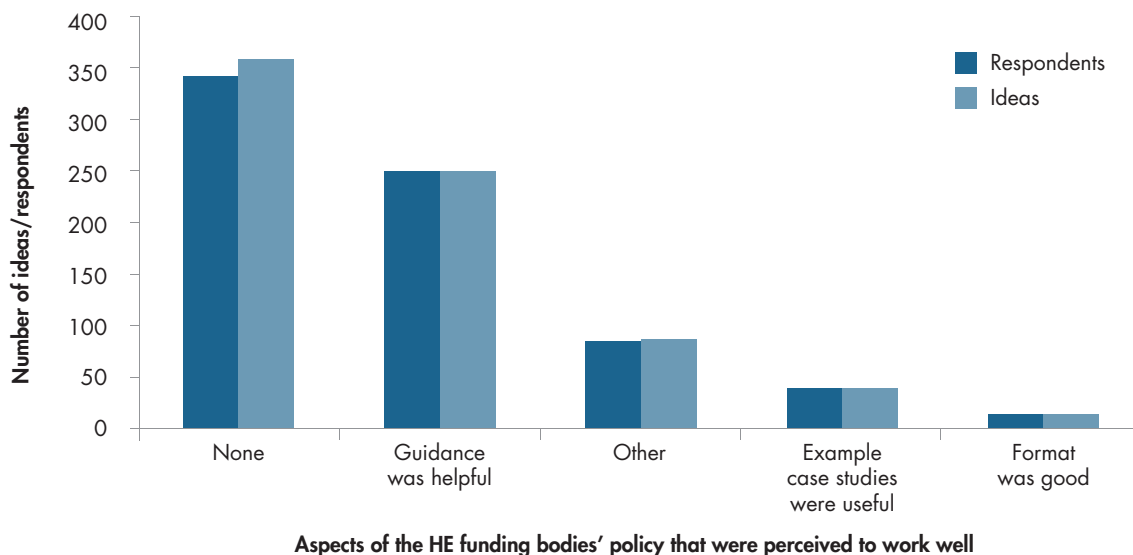
Good practice within HEIs: clear strategy

For the impact case study survey, 3 per cent of the ideas regarding good practice within the HEI were about having a clear strategy in place, while a slightly higher proportion of ideas in the impact template survey commented on this idea. Respondents noted that not only was it helpful to have ‘institutional agreement, clarity and fixity of purpose’ but also a ‘strategic approach in [the department]’ that allowed for ‘early identification of potential case studies, enabling an extended period of writing up’. One respondent stated that ‘the existence of an impact strategy was helpful in developing key sections of the template’ and another added it was helpful that their ‘university was well-prepared and had already collated information about much of the central strategy’.

**3.3.8. Aspects of the HE funding bodies’ policy that were perceived to work well**

In the final section of the survey, respondents were asked to identify aspects of the HE funding bodies’ policy for preparing the impact case study and impact template documents that worked well. In the impact case study survey, 748 ideas were identified, while 214 ideas were categorised in the impact template survey. These ideas were coded to five themes (see Figure 3-17 and Figure 3-18). The main results are summarised in Table 3-7, where we can see there are similarities between the ideas identified in the two surveys. It should be noted that

**Figure 3-17: Aspects of the HE funding bodies’ policy that were perceived to work well in preparing impact case studies (REF3b)**



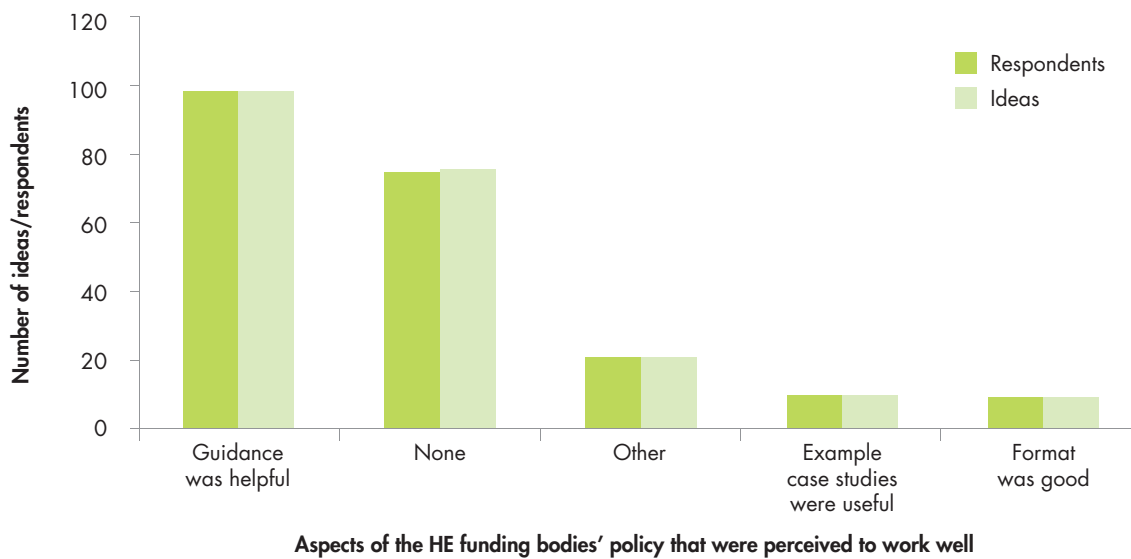
many people identified no aspects of policy that worked well, which means that some of the more specific ideas came from a minority of respondents.

Good practice in policy: guidance and format was helpful

Just over a quarter of the respondents to the impact case study survey stated that they found the guidance

helpful. Some felt that ‘the [impact case study] guidance for what was wanted was clear, so it was just followed to produce the case study’, ‘[it was] generally accessible and straightforward’ and ‘extensive’. Some 38 per cent of the impact template survey respondents found the impact template guidance documents helpful, with one respondent stating that the guidance was ‘clear and thorough’ and another feeling that it ‘provided a

**Figure 3-18: Aspects of the HE funding bodies’ policy that were perceived to work well in preparing impact templates (REF3a)**



**Table 3-7: Top five aspects of the HE funding bodies’ policy that were perceived to work well in the preparation of the impact element of the submission**

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Aspects of HE funding policy	% of total ideas about good practice (n=748)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Aspects of HE funding policy	% of total ideas about good practice (n=214)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
None	48%	36%	20	Guidance was helpful	46%	38%	19
Guidance was helpful	33%	26%	21	None	36%	29%	17
Other	11%	9%	17	Other	10%	8%	13
Example case studies were useful	5%	4%	15	Example case studies were useful	5%	4%	7
Format was good	2%	1%	9	Format was good	4%	3%	6

framework for what [they] should be including’.

Some 13 comments specifically described the format of the impact case study as being ‘easy to follow’ and respondents said that it was good to have a ‘limited number of sections... restricted in length and numbers of citations, evidence items and so forth’. Some identified the format of the impact template submission as good practice. Respondents stated that the way that ‘the template was broken down into sections that each had section-specific guidance was helpful’ and ‘the template itself helped the process – it would have been much more difficult to have been faced by a blank page’.

Good practice in policy: example case studies were helpful

Another area of policy that some perceived to work well was the provision of example case studies. Respondents said that ‘concrete examples were helpful’ and that the ‘the case study examples from the pilot exercise were invaluable’. Respondents also commented that there was a ‘good range of examples of what constitutes impact and at different stages in the research process’, which was useful. Even though impact template authors were producing a different kind of document, some (5 per cent) felt that the case study examples were helpful as ‘published exemplars helped in clarifying the parameters of impacts’ and that the ‘publication of examples’ was useful.

### 3.4. Caveats and limitations

The individuals who completed the two surveys were identified by their institution as being the lead authors working on the impact template and impact case study submissions. There may be other individuals who worked on the documents and whose views may not have been captured by our survey. It must also be noted that the amount of information available from the short, one sentence answers provided in the survey is inherently limited and does not provide details and further context regarding respondents comments. Related to this, there are inherent limitations in any qualitative analysis in respect of the creation of analytical categories, themes and ideas. These are constructs of the analysts and are not meant to represent an exhaustive analysis of the data. Rather, they are the themes and ideas that are most relevant to this evaluation (and they have been coded in a consistent way with the site visits).

Finally, all of the data collected from the impact template and impact case study surveys are self-reported and thus could hold inaccuracies. For example, when respondents were asked about the length of time it took to prepare a case study or template, this was an estimation based on their assessment and perception of the volume of work by others. Accurate figures require the individual to have been aware of all parts of the impact case study production process, which some respondents pointed out they were not. Due to our awareness of this caveat, information about time taken was also gathered at a central level.



## Chapter 4 Results from the interviews with research users

### 4.1. Background

This strand of the evaluation examined how research users engaged with REF 2014. In particular, it sought to explore whether the process of providing evidence of impact produced any benefits or challenges, including the nature of any resource burden placed on research users, and whether they felt anything could be done to improve the process as a whole.

### 4.2. Approach

#### 4.2.1. Sampling strategy

In order to explore the views of research users we undertook a series of telephone interviews with individual research users and representatives from organisations who had been asked for ten or more testimonials. We felt it was important to contact both individuals and organisations as they were likely to have different perspectives. In particular, emerging data from our site visits suggested that HEIs felt that some organisations were particularly over-burdened by requests for evidence from the REF, and we wanted to test this hypothesis in our sample.

The sample was generated from a list provided to us by HEFCE of individuals from the 21 institutions in our evaluation who were cited as either contactable for corroborating an impact case study, or who had provided testimonials in support of an impact case study. There were 5,225 individuals in this initial list. We focused on those who provided written testimonials, with the assumption that these individuals were more likely to have been involved in the process of preparing evidence for the case

studies. This resulted in a list of 3,482 individuals, which we used as the basis of our sample. The panel distribution of these research users is shown in Table 4-1.

**Table 4-1: Panel distribution of research users who provided testimonial data from our sample of 1,997 case studies**

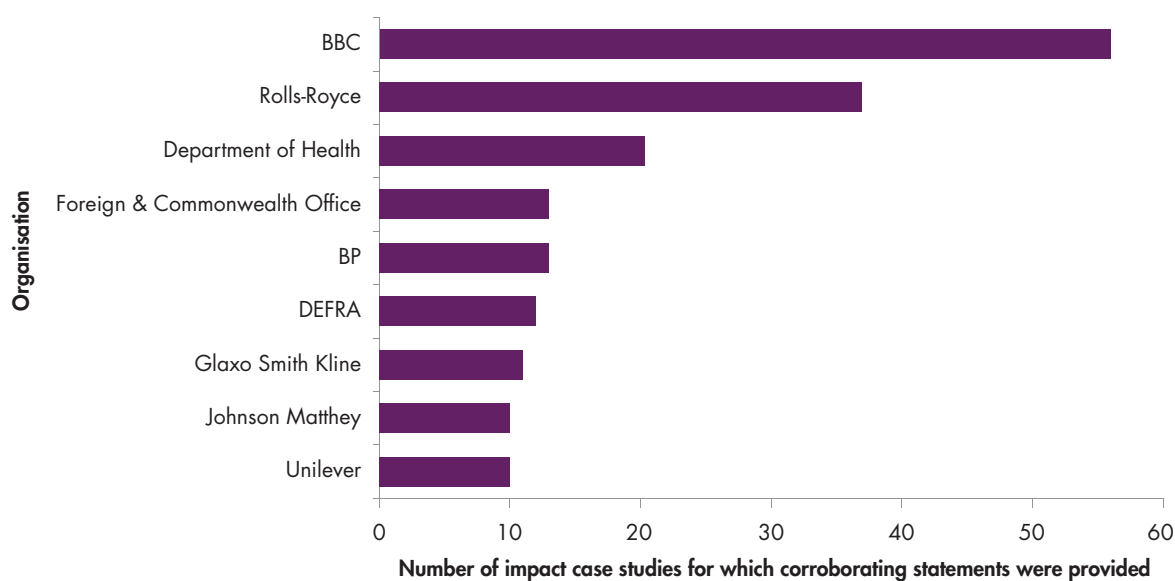
	Panel A	Panel B	Panel C	Panel D
Number of research users providing written testimonials	612	888	1,032	950

For the organisational sampling strategy, we identified 14 points of contact that had been asked for ten or more testimonials. We excluded those that did not represent one entity (e.g. the House of Commons or freelance individuals), leaving nine organisations that constituted our final organisational research user sample (Figure 41). Respondents from this sample were asked to respond from an organisational perspective, rather than based on individual experience.

At the individual level, we assigned a random number to each individual who provided a testimonial and took the top 30 randomly assigned numbers from each panel, giving a sample of 120. We then tried to ensure there was an even distribution between the public, private and third sectors, although due to the nature of the sample, only 16 per cent represented the third sector.<sup>39</sup> The distribution across panels and sectors is shown in Table 4-2.

Finally, we contacted the HEIs whose research users we wanted to approach and asked them to review our sample and indicate if there were any specific

<sup>39</sup> Web-based research was used to determine with which sector the randomly selected sample of 120 users were associated. We confirmed, in interviews, whether the allocation of sector was correct. 'Third sector' is a term used to refer to the area of the economy that falls between government and private organisations. The Cabinet Office's 'Office of the Third Sector' was renamed the 'Office of Civil Society' in 2010, and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

**Figure 4-1: Organisations asked for ten or more testimonials across the impact case studies of our sample of HEIs****Table 4-2: Sector and panel distribution of the sample of individual research users**

	Panel A	Panel B	Panel C	Panel D	Total	Sector percentage (%)
Public Sector	9	4	18	8	39	32
Private Sector	17	22	8	15	62	52
Third Sector	4	4	4	7	19	16
Total	30	30	30	30	120	100

individuals they did not want us to contact. They were asked to provide an explanation for the rationale behind any exclusions.<sup>40</sup> Four HEIs did not want any of their contacts to be involved in this process (primarily to avoid placing a further burden on research users) and a further five HEIs asked us to exclude specific individuals from the sample, leaving a total of 83 individuals.<sup>41</sup> Reasons for exclusion included the research users not being directly involved in the REF process (because they had already provided statements of corroboration before they were required for the REF process), the research users suffering from ill health, or a desire to not place additional burden on the research users. We were unable to find contact details for 26 individuals, leaving

a final research user sample of 57. The distribution of the sample across panels is shown in Table 4-3.

#### 4.2.2. Contacting research users

The nine organisations and 57 individuals in our final samples were contacted via e-mail to arrange an interview. Two reminder e-mails were sent to those that had not responded within two weeks of the first e-mail.

Organisational contacts (such as academic liaison posts) were identified with the help of HEFCE. Once contacted, the request was occasionally passed to someone more appropriate within the organisation. Three organisations declined to partake in the interview. In each

<sup>40</sup> As the sample was randomised by sector and panel we did not approach an equal number of research users from each HEI. In the case of two HEIs we did not contact any of their individual research users.

<sup>41</sup> We discussed with HEFCE whether this self-censorship was acceptable, given that HEIs had signed up to the evaluation knowing that we would be undertaking interviews with research users. We collectively agreed that this is an observation in itself and indicated the sensitivities in the HE sector about research user engagement in the REF. Therefore we did not challenge decisions to withdraw from this element of the study.

**Table 4-3: Panel and sector distribution of the final individual research user sample**

	Panel A	Panel B	Panel C	Panel D	Total
Public sector	5	0	10	2	17
Private sector	12	7	4	8	31
Third sector	3	1	3	2	9

case this was due to not being able to identify a relevant individual(s) within the organisation. One of the organisations provided a short written response based on the personal experience of the individual we contacted.

Nine individuals declined to take part in the interview. Reasons given for this were a lack of time and existing work commitments, and in two cases the appropriate person was no longer available for an interview due to internal restructuring or staff turnover. No response was received from 25 individuals.

Telephone interviews were thus conducted with 16 individuals and six organisational representatives. Seven individuals provided a short written response instead of participating in an interview. One individual respondent could not remember the process of providing evidence, though did believe it was done informally (the response from this interviewee is not included in analysis). All telephone interviews were conducted by one of four members of the evaluation team. Organisational and individual interviews were typically 15 minutes long. The interview protocols are provided in Appendix H.

#### 4.2.3. Analysis

Interview notes were recorded in a common template and then qualitatively analysed by the evaluation team. Where written responses were provided by an individual, we had less control over whether all questions were answered and to what extent. Therefore, not all questions had a complete set of 23 responses.

As the interviews were shorter and simpler than the site visits, a basic qualitative approach was used to synthesise and extract key themes, rather than using NVivo coding. Notes from each interview were added to an Excel template that consisted of the main questions covered in each interview. Analysis proceeded by taking each of these questions in turn, such as the benefits and challenges of engaging in the process, and identifying common issues and ideas raised by respondents.

Answers from each interviewee were organised into common categories for each question. For example, in relation to benefits, answers such as ‘continued collaboration’, ‘the relationship between the researcher and the organisation has developed’ and ‘it strengthens our relationship’ were all categorised as ‘relationship building’. The final numbers of ideas within each category and any associated nuances were reported on. Finally, we considered cross-cutting themes and triangulated the findings against the analysis from other tasks (as summarised in preceding chapters).

#### 4.2.4. Confidentiality

In presenting the results of the research user analysis we have attempted to ensure confidentiality by omitting identifying information wherever possible.

### 4.3. Results

The following sections summarise the results of the analysis of the individual and organisational interviews with research users. The analysis is organised according to the main questions in the interview protocols and covers individual/organisational awareness of REF 2014, type of support provided, benefits of providing evidence, challenges of providing evidence, resource estimations and any suggested improvements.

#### 4.3.1. Awareness of REF 2014

In order to explore the context in which research users provided evidence, we asked all interviewees about their knowledge of REF 2014 prior to being asked to provide corroborating statements by HEIs. The responses differ markedly between individual research users and organisational representatives.

Most (13 of 23) individual respondents were not aware of the REF prior to being contacted by the academic for whom the evidence was needed. Of the remaining

nine that were aware, their knowledge was minimal and vague, aside from two individuals who were familiar with the process through other work commitments.

However, all six organisational respondents were very familiar with the process; three respondents were panel members and others commented on their familiarity resulting from a high level of collaborations with HEIs and dealings with other government agencies such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and HEFCE. This suggests that those providing evidence statements from large organisations may have done so with relatively little additional learning about the REF process compared to those from smaller organisations.

#### 4.3.2. Type of support provided

We asked research users to describe how they had supported the development of impact case studies for REF 2014. This included whether any additional documents, figures or data had been provided in addition to the testimonial, whether certain types of evidence were more difficult to provide than others and whether any other staff within the organisation were involved in producing the testimonial (including any central oversight of the process).

Just under half the individual interviewees (10 of 23) reported that they provided additional material, including evidence of improved efficiency within an organisation as a result of research (e.g. time-saving estimates, increases in outputs, impacts on the organisation's bottom line), sales data, policy document citations, miscellaneous data, evaluation forms, impact evaluation data, audit materials, and results carried out using HEI research. Of the ten who provided additional data, two commented that they had particular difficulties in providing sales data and finding data retrospectively, while another commented that they struggled to define and articulate impact (a feeling shared by someone who had not provided additional material). In addition, one respondent commented that financial data would have been too sensitive to provide. The average resource estimates for those who provided additional data is higher than the average for the sample as a whole. Only two respondents explicitly stated they had consulted other staff in producing the testimonial; in neither case did this relate to a need for central oversight.

Three organisational interviewees commented that they did not provide any quantitative or financial data, while one stated they estimated the monetary contribution to the organisation of HEI research in

corroborating statements. One interviewee noted that there are numerous difficulties in providing financial information, including that:

- Much of this information is commercially sensitive
- The translation time from research to routine use in practice can be very long
- Often the research is applied as part of a much more complex 'solution'
- Identifying the impact of one element to the exclusion of other elements of a system can be complex.

Despite these difficulties, organisational interviewees pointed out that these commercially sensitive issues were overcome through working with the partnering research institutions to find more appropriate ways of describing and evidencing the impact.

Interviewees at two of the six organisations had an internal 'sign off' process for evidence provided to HEIs. In one organisation the evidence was simply signed off by the relevant business/team leader, while another had a structured internal process for providing testimonials. This aimed to ensure consistent evidence was given to all HEIs that requested it and to protect against conflicts of interest. The procedure involved the development and use of a standard paragraph, which was added to by outlining the particular impact of the research in question. This was then signed off at a senior level. A third organisation explicitly stated that there was not a centralised or coordinated approach in place.

#### 4.3.3. Benefits

Table 4-4 summarises the direct and indirect benefits organisational and individual interviewees noted when asked about providing evidence for REF 2014 impact case studies.

Although 21 of the 23 individual interviewees did not see any direct benefits in providing a testimonial, this group was generally positive about the process and 17 respondents noted an indirect benefit. The two individuals who did mention a direct benefit noted that the process of providing evidence had specifically led to the establishment of a new collaboration with the HEI.

In terms of indirect benefits, five interviewees noted that the process contributed to relationship building. This was variously thought to inspire further collaborations, more formal relationships, and provide the opportunity to give feedback to the researcher requesting the evidence. Four individuals stated that

**Table 4-4: Direct and indirect benefits identified by individual and organisational interviewees providing evidence for impact case studies (REF3b)**

Individual interviewees		Organisational interviewees	
Direct benefits	Indirect benefits	Direct benefits	Indirect benefits
None	Relationship building	None	Relationship building
Establishment of a new collaboration	Demonstrate the value of the HEI's research	Demonstrate the value of HEI research	
	Interesting to be part of the process	Benefits of the wider impact agenda	
		Having case studies to explicitly refer to	

the process was a good way to show how the HEI's work is valued by others, given that they were appreciative of the benefits brought about by the research. A further three interviewees stated that it was interesting to be part of the process as it allowed them to gain an understanding of REF 2014 and to think about how research and its associated impact can be communicated to a lay audience. Another three outlined the importance of the HEI's research to their organisation, rather than the process of providing evidence for the purpose of REF 2014. Therefore this is not a benefit of the process itself, but nevertheless a point worth noting. Ultimately, the majority of research users could see some benefits in being involved with REF 2014.

Two organisations felt the process helped to crystallise and further demonstrate the way in which HEI research had benefitted and impacted on their organisation, but four organisations could not see any direct benefits. One interviewee noted that they can now show exactly what has been extracted from a partnership with an HEI, and another noted that they can articulate the value from the relationships in terms of money, strategic direction and joint publications. The organisational interviewees also mentioned indirect benefits of participating in the process: two noted the importance of relationship building; three commented it was a good way of showing how the HEI's work is valued; and two noted it is useful to be able to refer to examples of HEI impact in the form of case studies. Three interviewees outlined the benefits of the wider impact agenda for their organisation in terms of encouraging academic researchers to do research of importance for them, and the potential for it to lead to more 'valuable and translational research' as well as behaviour change. Again, these were not benefits solely attributable to engaging in preparations for REF 2014.

A number of the benefits outlined by research users correspond to those highlighted by academics in our site visits and through the impact case study and impact template surveys. In particular, strengthening relationships between academics and research users as a result of the process was highlighted across all three evidence sources. Moreover, the chance to reflect on the value of academic research and how it has benefitted a range of research user groups was also highlighted by both research users and academics, who also thought it to be important in forming new collaborations and justifying public sector funding.

#### 4.3.4. Challenges

Table 4-5 summarises the direct and indirect challenges organisational and individual interviewees noted when asked about providing evidence for REF 2014 impact case studies.

Only a small minority (5 of 23) individual interviewees identified any significant challenges in providing evidence, with 18 individuals suggesting there were no significant challenges at all. Three of those who named significant challenges had also provided additional data and identified the time spent undertaking the process, gathering sales data, the fact this was a new exercise, and challenges of collecting 'soft data', as significant. A further interviewee, who did not provide additional data, noted that knowing how much time and energy to invest in the process was a primary challenge.

A number of interviewees highlighted challenges that they classified as minor or insignificant issues. Two commented on the time taken to provide data as a minor challenge, while others found the fact this was a new exercise and was therefore unstructured to be an insignificant challenge. Two interviewees commented that

**Table 4-5: Direct and indirect challenges identified by individual and organisational interviewees providing evidence for impact case studies (REF3b)**

Individual interviewees		Organisational interviewees
Significant challenges	Insignificant challenges	Challenges
	Time	Problem of contribution/attribution
	The fact it was a new exercise	Lack of institutional memory
None	Collecting data retrospectively	Ability to identify the right person in the organisation
Investing the right amount of time and energy		Being asked for commercially sensitive information
Collecting sales data		The time and effort required
		Ensuring consistency in all evidence provided across the organisation
		Estimating the monetary value of research and the magnitude of impact

gathering data retrospectively was a minor challenge.

Among the six organisations interviewed, one noted that there were no challenges. Two organisations noted the problem of contribution/attribution in terms of relating impact specifically to the work of an HEI. One of these organisations noted that in a very small number of instances they felt that universities had overstated their impact. Other challenges (which were each mentioned once across four organisations) were the lack of institutional memory and the ability to identify the right person in the organisation to provide the information; the problem of being asked for commercially sensitive information (although this was resolved); the time and effort the process required and the fact it acted as a distraction; doing anything other than simply validating a fact (e.g. to provide confirmation of impact magnitude); and ensuring consistency in all evidence provided by the organisation. The one organisation that attempted to estimate the monetary value of HEIs' research contributions noted that this was a particular challenge.

It is interesting to compare the challenges noted by academics in the site visits and survey data with those outlined by research users. Many academics believed there was a significant challenge in burdening research users with providing evidence of impact, and in some cases they believed this to be damaging to their relationship. However, our analysis shows that the research users we spoke with did not generally find the process to be either burdensome or problematic. The caveat to this is that some research users were excluded from

our sample and we do not know if these may have experienced a more significant burden than others. The issue of collecting data retrospectively was found to be a problem by both research users and academics – a challenge that may be attributable to this being the first REF impact assessment exercise. Relatedly, the lack of institutional memory both within HEIs and within research user organisations (as well as the ability to identify the right person within an organisation) was also cited by academics as a significant challenge in evidencing impact. Finally, the ability to obtain or provide sales figures or commercially sensitive information was a problem for both academics and research users.

#### 4.3.5. Resource estimates

We asked all individual interviewees how long they spent providing HEIs with a testimonial. Responses ranged from 15 minutes to 30 hours (interquartile range 1–7.5 hours). Across the whole sample, the median time spent was two hours. For the ten individuals who provided additional data, the median time was four hours.

No organisations thought the process was onerous and three organisations estimated the time spent on providing evidence: one estimated an hour per request; one estimated 30 minutes to one hour per request; and one, which also employed a more centralised process for providing and approving testimonials, estimated that each request took less than a day. Three organisations also noted that more than one individual was

involved in responding to each request and of these two required senior sign-off.

For one government organisation, the resource element was made up of two aspects: firstly determining what needed to be provided, and secondly judging whether the organisation could provide the information. The latter was a particular issue for civil servants as they cannot endorse individual HEIs. However, because REF 2014 was a process managed by a government body and entailed completing a standard document to validate a statement that had already been made, they felt they had the confidence to provide testimonials without being seen to risk endorsing one HEI over another.

#### 4.3.6. Improvements

Finally, both organisations and individual interviewees were asked about any improvements they would make to the process of providing evidence for future REF exercises. Five individual interviewees suggested that more information or guidance regarding the REF context and what was required of research users in the process would be useful. Four noted that a structured testimonial format would be beneficial, and one suggested this could take the form of an electronic submission portal. Three stated they would like to receive feedback about results and two noted the evidence of impact could have been better recorded within their organisation or by the researcher. This latter point is echoed by many comments we heard during the HEI site visits about the challenge of gathering evidence retrospectively. Four individuals stated that they would not improve anything about the process.

Other improvements (each of which were stated by one individual) included: increasing the timeline for research users to prepare the material; providing warning of follow-up evaluations; avoiding follow-up evaluations; and ensuring a positive attitude from academics when approaching research users in order to highlight the benefits.

Organisational representatives noted improvements in three different categories: for their internal processes, for HEIs, and for the sector as a whole. In relation to internal processes, one interviewee stated that it would have been better to collect the information centrally. Regarding HEIs, one stated they would encourage academics to try to identify the appropriate person within the organisation in the case of staff turnover, and another stated that HEIs need to engage early, have realistic expectations about what can be provided, concentrate on those research

collaborations that truly are significant, and to think more broadly about the definition of impact. For the sector as a whole, two organisations commented that the process was not overly bureaucratic and was relatively light touch, which they were happy with. Both said they would not want the process to become any heavier. However, another organisation outlined the need for a wider set of changes to the impact agenda. The interviewee stated that a broader culture change is needed rather than impact only being part of REF. It was felt that relationships between academia and industry should be encouraged and enabled as much as possible and funding councils should not get in the way of this. The interviewee suggested that a culture of collaboration should be nurtured.

#### 4.4. Caveats and limitations

The analysis presented above is subject to some methodological caveats and limitations. First, we gave respondents the choice to partake in a short telephone interview or provide a written response. The seven individuals who chose to provide a written response did not always answer every element of each question.

Second, we collected data from a total of 29 research users, which is a relatively small sample. Moreover, of the 57 individual (rather than organisational) users in our initial sample 53 per cent were from the private sector, whereas only 16 per cent were from the third sector – meaning the private sector was over-represented. Third, the interviews were undertaken by different analysts within the team, meaning that the way in which the data was collected varied – although each interviewer asked questions from the predefined protocols.

Finally, there is likely to be a sampling bias in that we were not able to contact organisations or individuals that declined to provide evidence for REF 2014. We heard during our site visits that every institution had at least one experience of an organisation or individual declining to provide evidence for an impact case study. We did not, though, press for names as this would have impacted on sensitive relationships between the HEIs and the research users. In addition, four HEIs did not want us to contact any of their research users and all HEIs were given the option of reviewing their research users and indicating those they did not want us to contact because of relationship sensitivities, confidentiality of the case studies, or other reasons. We can only assume that in the case of any difficult relationships, HEIs were likely to ask us to not contact those individuals.

Therefore, our sample was likely to be biased towards those individual research users that had a positive experience. This approach was agreed with HEIs and HEFCE beforehand, though, and was the only way all parties would feel comfortable. To a large extent, therefore, the identified sampling bias was out of our control. The approach of contacting the organisations that had the most testimonials linked to them across our sample of 21 HEIs might have mitigated this bias. We did not seek approval from HEIs to contact the organisations as the questions being asked were linked to an overall experience across multiple institutions and not one HEI in particular.



## Chapter 5 Results from the cost analysis

### 5.1. Background

To contribute to the cost analysis we estimated the costs associated with preparing submissions for the impact element of REF. It should be stressed that this cost analysis is indicative and based on data provided to us by HEIs. A number of assumptions were made, as discussed below. Nevertheless, taken with the other data sources (the site visits and surveys) it is a useful way of understanding the overall burden to HEIs.

### 5.2. Approach

To estimate the costs of preparing submissions for the impact assessment element of REF 2014, we asked HEIs to complete a cost estimation worksheet (see Appendix I). Box 5-1 summarises the data requested. The worksheet aimed to capture different types of resource spread over a number of different activities for both impact case studies (REF3b) and impact templates (REF3a). In addition we asked HEIs to estimate what proportion of the costs for different activities they could ascribe as ‘start-up’ (i.e. costs that will not be incurred in subsequent REFs). From this data we were able to generate four key indicators:

- Median cost per impact case study
- Median cost per impact template
- Total costs of REF 2014
- Transaction costs (i.e. total costs divided by estimated QR benefit/funding).

We also examined, where possible, the cost drivers (i.e. activities undertaken in developing the impact case studies or impact templates, see Box 5-1), and differences by HEI characteristics (i.e. size of submission).

Of the 21 recruited HEIs that participated in the evaluation, 18 provided completed worksheets that could be used in the analysis. One HEI had declined previous Freedom of Information requests regarding the costs of

participating in REF 2014 and chose to maintain this principle for this evaluation and has not supplied data. The remaining two provided information but outside the structure of the spreadsheet template provided; we were able to use some but not all of this information and primarily were constrained in not being able to analyse cost drivers and activities for these two institutions.

#### Box 5-1: Summary of information collected in cost estimation worksheets

##### Type of cost:

- Labour – number of days by whom (academic/academic-related), or grade in the case of new posts)
- Direct costs – such as for IT systems

##### Type of activity:

- Writing impact case studies
- Evidencing impact case studies
- Reviewing impact case studies
- Other support for the development of impact case studies
- Developing impact templates
- Reviewing impact templates
- Developing impact case study strategy for the institution
- Developing impact case study strategy for a Unit of Assessment
- Selecting impact case studies
- Managing the overall process of preparing the impact submission
- Other time spent managing the impact submission
- Training

##### Proportion estimated to be start-up costs

#### 5.2.1. Quality assurance

On receiving the completed worksheets we undertook a number of comparative quality assurance checks to

**Table 5-1: Comparison of number of days spent preparing case studies and impact templates by source of data**

	Impact case studies (REF3b)	Impact templates (REF3a)
Median number of days estimated in institutional cost analysis worksheets	30 days (total number of days spent preparing case studies)	17 days (total number of days spent on preparing impact templates)
Interquartile range	23–50 days	13–28 days
Median number of days estimated in survey	8 days (total number of days spent preparing an impact case study estimated by the lead author)	15 days (total number of days spent preparing an impact template estimated by the lead author)
Interquartile range	4–15 days	9–29 days

ensure that the submitted data had face validity and to examine in more detail those HEIs reporting outliers. These tests included:

- Checking and comparing the number of days per activity for impact case studies and impact templates.
- Checking and comparing the number of days spent on training events.
- Checking and comparing the number of new FTEs per impact case study.
- Comparing the data submitted as part of the cost estimation worksheet (which provides an institutional perspective) with that provided by individual impact case study and impact template authors from survey data (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).

These checks highlighted two issues. First, it seemed that a small number ( $n=5$  of 18) of HEIs had completed the time spent on training in hours, rather than the requested unit of days. This proved to be the case in four of those five HEIs and we adjusted the data accordingly (assuming 7.5 hours a day).<sup>42</sup> The other HEI found it difficult to estimate the number of training days as this provision was devolved to units of assessment, panels, faculty and departments, resulting in a high risk of double counting. In discussion with that HEI, we took the average number of training days per impact case study estimated from the HEIs that were able to provide such data, and multiplied this figure by the relevant number of case studies.

The second issue was that one HEI interpreted ‘direct

costs’ as full economic costs and had monetised the amount of time spent accordingly, rather than providing the (out of pocket) direct expenses that we were requesting. In discussion with the HEI we corrected for this error.

We also compared the estimated time spent on writing impact case studies/impact templates with the results provided by the survey of impact case study and impact template authors (see Section 3.3.2). The cost estimation worksheet provided an institutional perspective whilst the survey provided an individual one. As illustrated in Table 5-1, these different perspectives furnished similar estimates for the impact templates, but quite different ones for the impact case studies, with the institutions suggesting a greater resource input than individuals. In calculating costs we used the institutional perspective, which means we erred on the side of over-estimation.

### 5.2.2. Allocating costs between impact case studies and impact templates

Four categories of costs had to be allocated between preparing impact case studies and impact templates:

- Managing the overall process of preparing the impact submission
- Other time spent managing the impact submission
- Training
- New databases, IT tools or materials.

To do this we apportioned the amount of time spent on each activity based on the data provided for the activities listed in Box 5-1. The median split was 86 per cent

<sup>42</sup> This is the assumption of length of working day made in the PA Consulting report that assessed the costs of RAE 2008 (PA Consulting Group 2008). As summarised below (Section 5.2.3), wherever possible we sought to use similar assumptions to this report to maintain consistency between their cost estimates for RAE 2008 and ours for the impact portion of REF 2014.

and 14 per cent for impact case studies and impact templates respectively. This is intuitively appropriate given that the impact templates account for 20 per cent of the overall impact rating (i.e. 4 of the 20 per cent weighting given to impact in the REF).

### 5.2.3. Monetising labour time

To monetise the amount of time spent on preparing impact assessment submissions we calculated day rates for each HEI for three categories of labour:

- Existing staff
- New staff
- External contractors.

For the existing and new staff we took the weighted mean of median staff salary for different groups of staff within each HEI participating in the evaluation using data provided to us by HEFCE.<sup>43</sup>

For existing staff we used two broad categories: academic and academic-related staff. For new staff we asked HEIs to provide information on seniority using five broad grades: junior-grade professional (equivalent to lecturer/researcher); middle-grade professional (equivalent to principal/senior lecturer/researcher); senior-grade professional (equivalent to professor or reader); senior leadership; and other grades. As explained in Box 5-2, this involved mapping different HEFCE categories to those we used in the cost estimation worksheet.

To calculate day rates we divided the FTE median salary by the number of working days in a year (assumed to be 260) and adjusted the day rate for salary on-costs (assumed to be 30 per cent). Where we had to convert hours to days we assumed 7.5 hours a day. We used the same assumptions employed in the RAE 2008 Accountability Review, with the exception of the salary on-costs which was then estimated to be 16 per cent and, in discussion with HEFCE, we concluded was unrealistic. We used this approach to calculate the day rate for existing and new staff. For contractor days we assumed the average day rate to be £750.

We were able to estimate the total labour costs by summing the number of days spent on various activities and multiplying that by the appropriate day rate.

### 5.2.4. Estimating total costs and transaction costs

The primary purpose of the cost estimation was not to calculate the *total* cost of REF 2014 to an HEI, but to understand the costs associated with preparing for the impact assessment. However, in order to ensure continuity between the previous estimation of the costs of the RAE and to enable an assessment of the ‘transaction costs’ of the impact element of the REF, we needed to estimate the cost of the non-impact element of REF 2014.

We defined ‘transaction costs’ as the total costs for preparing submissions to REF 2014 divided by the total expected QR funding that HEIs may receive over six years (i.e. between 2015 and an assumed REF in 2020).<sup>44</sup> We conservatively estimated QR funding to be £8.2bn for this period. We feel this is conservative as we focused on QR funding for 2013/14, which was £1.4bn and did not inflate this figure for the subsequent six years.<sup>45</sup> For the non-impact elements of REF 2014, we used the costs estimated by the Accountability Review of RAE 2008 (PA Consulting Group 2008). However, as summarised in Table 5-2, in order to use these figures we had to first subtract costs associated with the RAE 2008 panels (9.2 per cent). Since the resulting ‘preparation costs’ were for England only, we had to apply a multiplication factor to derive a figure for the whole UK, and then inflate the figures using GDP statistics (HM Treasury 2014). This resulted in an estimate of the costs of the non-impact element of REF 2014 of £66m.

**Table 5-2: Estimate of the costs of non-impact elements of REF 2014**

Calculation	Outcome
Reported costs	£47m
Minus non-preparation costs	9.2%
Preparation costs	£43m
Calculated for UK	£58m
Inflated	£66m

<sup>43</sup> These data are provided to HEFCE by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (staff record 2012-13). Higher Education Statistics Agency (homepage). As of 28 July 2014: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

<sup>44</sup> We also estimate the transaction costs associated with the impact element of REF (i.e. the costs of preparing impact submissions divided by the financial benefit as the 20 per cent weight of QR funding).

<sup>45</sup> Some other aspects of recurrent funding are also informed by the outcomes of research assessment.

**Box 5-2: Mapping of HEFCE staff categories to broader categories used in the survey**

The following are the staff grouping definitions that HEFCE provided to us along with the data:

**Academic staff:** all staff who are actively employed on 1 December 2012 with at least one active academic contract at a total full-time equivalent (FTE) of at least 25 per cent.

**Professional and support staff:** all staff who are actively employed on 1 December 2012 with at least one active professional and support contract at a total full-time equivalent (FTE) of at least 25 per cent.

For each HEI, HEFCE provided us with the **median salary data** for these two broad staff groupings disaggregated into various contract levels. We mapped the **contract levels** on to our academic and academic-related staff categories as listed below:

The **academic staff** include the following contract levels:

- *Institutional strategic leadership*
- *Senior Management Team*
- *Head of a distinct area of academic responsibility*
- *Head of School/ Division/ Department/ Centre Size 2*
- *Head of School/ Division/ Department/ Centre Size 3*
- *Head of a subset of academic area/ Directors of Small Centres*
- *Professor*
- *Non-Academic Staff Section Manager, Senior Lecturer (pre-92), Principal Lecturer (post-92),*
- *Reader, Principal Research fellow*
- *Section/Team Leader (Professional, Technical, Administrative), Lecturer B (pre-92),*
- *Senior Lecturer (post-92), Senior Research Fellow*
- *Senior Professional/ Technical/Staff, Lecturer A (pre-92), Lecturer (post-92), Research fellow,*
- *Researcher/senior research assistant, Teaching fellow*
- *Professional/ Technical/ Senior Administrative Staff, Research Assistant, Teaching Assistant*
- *Administrative staff*

The **academic-related staff** (i.e., professional support staff) include the following contract levels:

- *Institutional strategic leadership*
- *Senior Management Team*
- *Head of School/ Division/ Department*
- *Head of a subset of academic area/ Directors of Small Centres*
- *Function Head*
- *Non-Academic Staff Section Manager, Senior Lecturer (pre-92), Principal Lecturer (post-92),*
- *Reader, Principal Research fellow*
- *Section/Team Leader (Professional, Technical, Administrative), Lecturer B (pre-92),*
- *Senior Lecturer (post-92), Senior Research Fellow*
- *Senior Professional/ Technical/Staff, Lecturer A (pre-92), Lecturer (post-92), Research fellow,*
- *Researcher/senior research assistant, Teaching fellow*
- *Professional/ Technical/ Senior Administrative Staff, Research Assistant, Teaching Assistant*
- *Assistant Professional Staff, Administrative Staff*
- *Junior Administrative Staff, Clerical Staff, Technician/Craftsmen, Operative*
- *Routine Task Provider*
- *Simple Task Provider*

Staff with clinical roles are excluded from all populations due to the differences in pay for these staff. The numbers of staff were rounded to the nearest five and the median salary to the nearest £1000. For each HEI, we calculated the **weighted (mean of the) median salaries** at the different contract levels to arrive at single (median) salary figures for academic staff and academic-related staff.

Figure 5-1: Estimated costs (from 20 HEIs) of producing impact case studies and impact templates

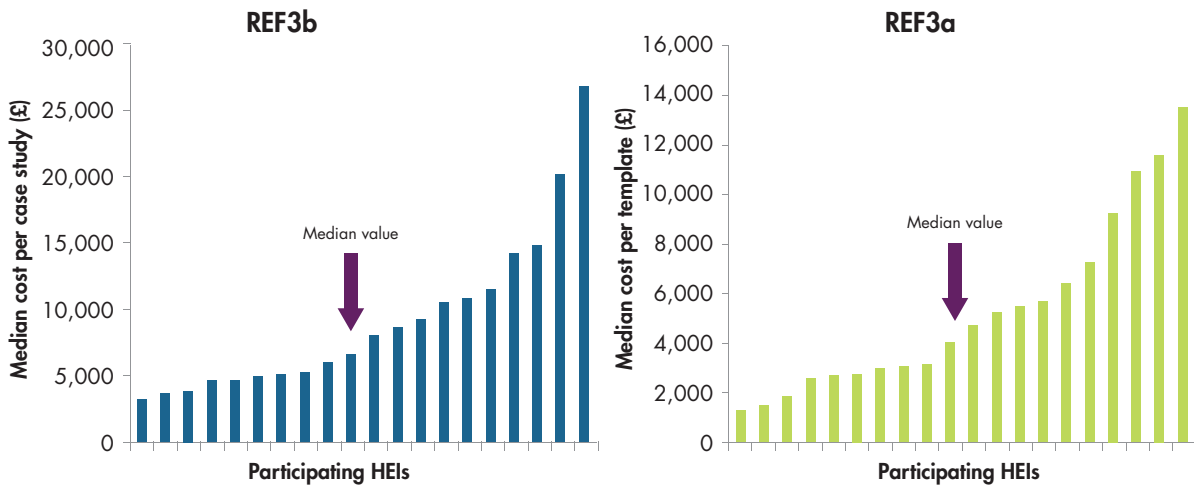


Table 5-3: Summary of key costs indicators

	Best estimate <sup>46</sup>	Comparable estimate <sup>47</sup>
Cost per impact case study	£7,500 <sup>48</sup>	£7,000
Cost per impact template	£4,500	£4,000
Total estimated costs for the impact assessment element of REF 2014	£55m	£51m
Total estimated costs for preparing REF 2014	£121m	£115m
Transaction costs (i.e. total costs divided by estimated QR funding until next REF)	1.4%	1.4%

### 5.2.5. Analysis

Once we had derived estimates for the four key indicators for each of the 18 HEIs that provided us with a cost estimation worksheet, we undertook a range of descriptive analyses:

- Analysis of key cost indicators by HEIs
- Analysis of activity (cost drivers) by HEIs
- Analysis of start-up costs
- One-way sensitivity analysis.

The results of these analyses are provided in Section 5.3 below.

### 5.2.6. Confidentiality

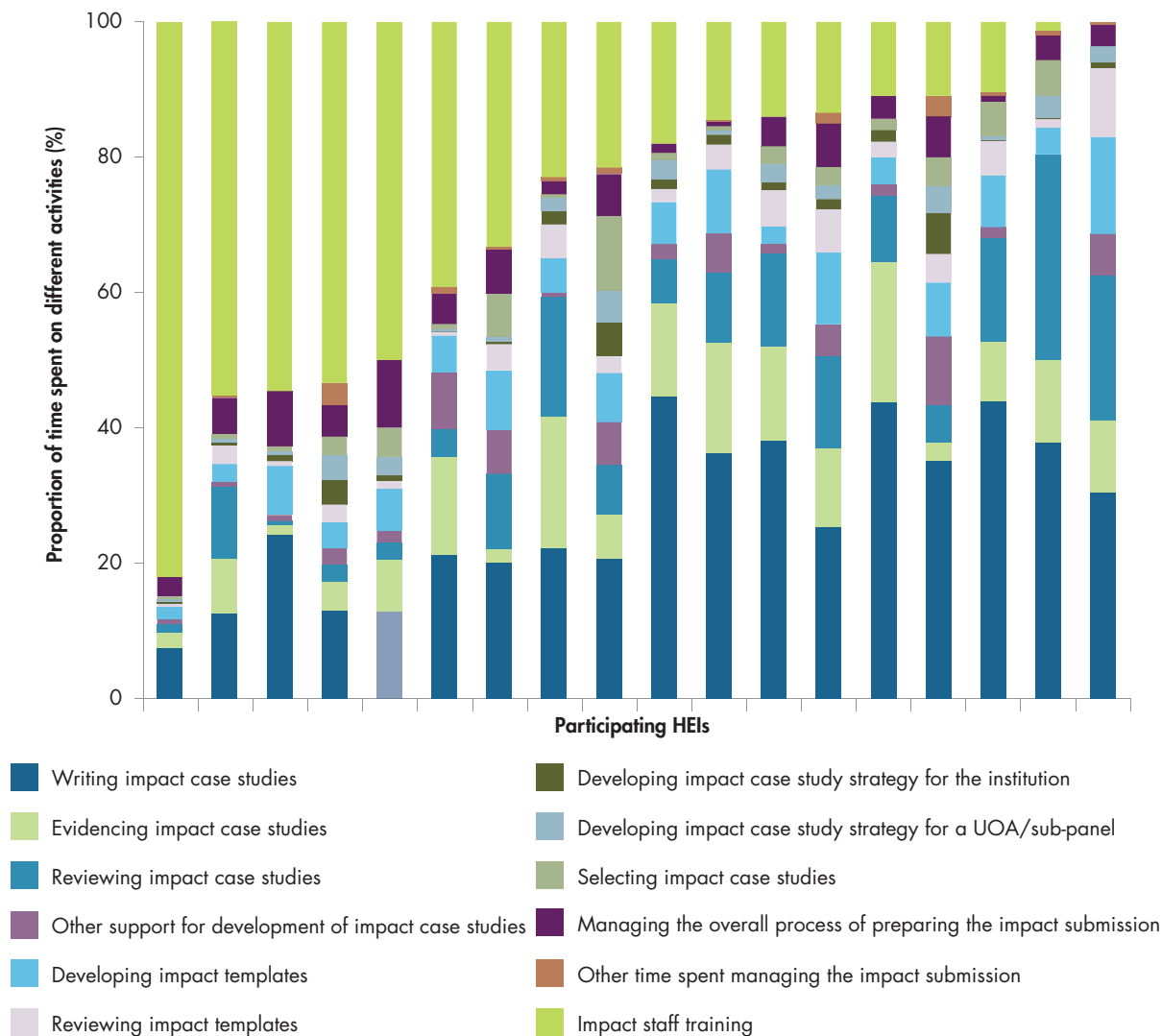
In presenting the results of the cost estimation analysis we need to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided to us by the participating HEIs. For this reason we have anonymised the data and do not provide any information that allows an HEI to be identified (for example, the number of impact case studies submitted).

<sup>46</sup> We have rounded our 'best estimate' up to the nearest £500 so as not to present a spurious degree of accuracy in the cost analysis. The actual median cost per impact case study was £7,360 (range: £3,216–26,890; interquartile range: £4,899–11,011) and the median cost per impact template £4,368 (range: £1,318–13,523; interquartile range: £2,745–6,631).

<sup>47</sup> That is with on-costs at 16 per cent as assumed in the RAE 2008 Accountability review. This is examined further in the one-way sensitivity analysis reported below.

<sup>48</sup> There was substantial difference in the estimated time spent on preparing impact case studies by institutions from the cost analysis (30 days) compared with survey estimates from impact case study authors (8 days). This may in part be because the case study authors did not account for other activities organised centrally. Either way, to err on the side of caution (i.e. a possible overestimate of burden), we used the higher institution estimates in our analysis.

**Figure 5-2: Proportion of time spent on different activities associated with preparing impact submissions for REF 2014**



We only present the full data distribution for the four key indicators and limited further data presentations to median values, with ranges and interquartile ranges.

## 5.3. Results

### 5.3.1. Analysis of key cost indicators by HEIs

The key results from our cost analysis are summarised in Table 5-3, with the cost per impact case study and impact template by HEI presented in Figure 5-1.

### 5.3.2. Analysis of activity (cost drivers) by HEIs

Figure 5-2 presents the proportion of time spent on different activities by the 18 HEIs that provided data to allow this level of comparative analysis. Although

time spent writing impact case studies and training took up about half of all time expended, there is clearly great variance in the amount of time different HEIs allocated to different tasks, raising the question as to whether different approaches to resource allocation will correspond with the results of the REF 2014 when published.

### 5.3.3. Analysis of start-up costs

Seven of the 18 HEIs that provided data on start-up costs explicitly stated there were none – that is they would anticipate the same level of costs in future REFs. As illustrated in Figure 5-3, the estimated start-up costs for the remaining 11 HEIs ranged from 2 per cent to 23 per cent. Taking these costs across the sample, the total estimated start-up costs was about £6m or 5 per cent of the estimated total costs across all 18 HEIs. That said it

Figure 5-3: Estimated start-up costs for the 11 HEIs that identified them

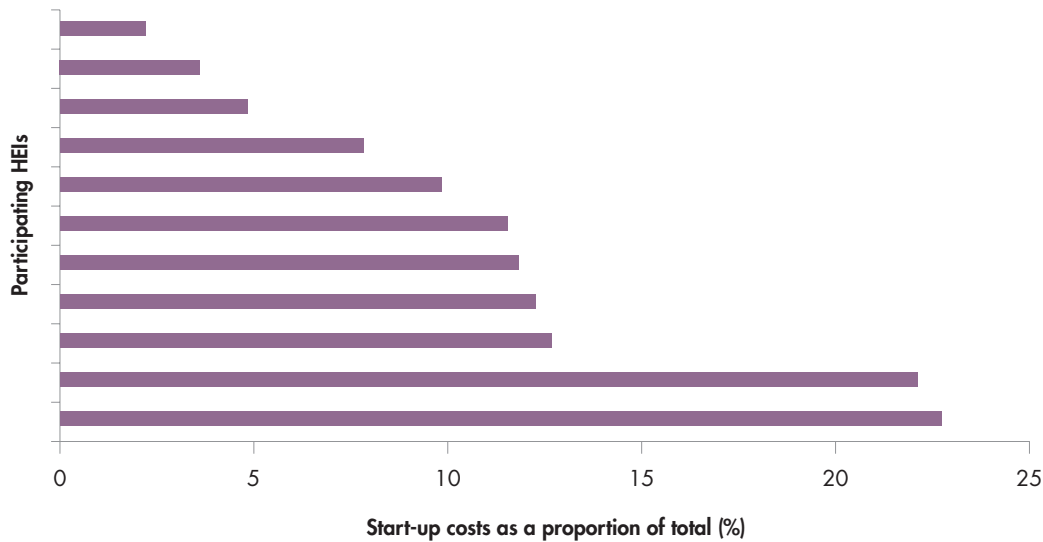


Table 5-4: One-way sensitivity analysis of core assumptions

	Cost per impact case study	Cost per impact template	Total estimate costs for impact assessment
Best estimate	£7,500	£4,500	£55m
Comparable (most optimistic) estimate	£7,000	£4,000	£51m
Most pessimistic estimate <sup>49</sup>	£8,000	£5,000	£63m

is interesting to note that 28 per cent of time allocated to the REF was on training that, arguably, might not need to be repeated in subsequent rounds. Nevertheless, even taking an optimistic view of training time allocation it is unlikely that the start-up costs exceed 10 per cent for the impact element of REF 2014.

### 5.3.4. One-way sensitivity analysis

To examine the robustness of our estimate we explored the sensitivity of the key indicators to the assumptions we had to make, as presented in Table 5-4. Whilst there are inevitable differences in resulting cost estimates, they are within 10 per cent of one another, suggesting that our best estimate is reasonably insensitive to our core assumptions (as discussed below, this also means that it is sensitive to the data provided to us by HEIs).

## 5.4. Caveats and limitations

The estimates we have provided have to be treated as indicative and we would caution against assigning spurious accuracy to them. Within that context, and as noted above, they are reasonably insensitive to the key assumptions but by necessity are reliant on the data provided to us by HEIs. In collecting those data we emphasised to HEIs that we were after indicative estimates and we did not want them to undertake a detailed cost exercise (conscious that we did not want to add to their burden in agreeing to participate in the evaluation). We worked with the HEIs in reviewing the data to ensure consistency across institutions and are reasonably confident that we achieved that aim. It is also worth noting that we used a similar approach to that adopted in the RAE 2008 costing exercise. In other words, the estimates presented are in our view reasonable but we are the first to acknowledge that that is all they are – estimates of the burden experienced by HEIs in preparing impact submissions for REF 2014.

<sup>49</sup> This assumes on-costs of 30 per cent, an 8-hour day, 220-day year and per diem costs for contractors of £1000.





## Chapter 6 Synthesis and conclusions

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### 6.1. Background

The purpose of this final chapter is to describe the cross-cutting analysis and synthesis of the key themes from our evaluation, which are also discussed in greater detail in the accompanying *Findings and observations* report. These emerge from a ‘top-down’ perspective and a ‘bottom-up’ analysis of the data from each of the four main evidence streams (summarised in Chapters 2 to 5). We were conscious as we proceeded through the evaluation that there was a vast amount of data being collected, particularly from the site visits. We needed to ensure that we captured all relevant information and themes that would emerge from the analysis of that data, but in a way that would give coherence to the main messages. We therefore adopted this ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach to the final synthesis.

### 6.2. Approach

#### 6.2.1. The ‘top-down’ approach

Due to the volume of data being collected in the evaluation we developed a ‘top-down’ approach in order to begin the process of understanding and synthesising across the data sources. We began by asking each member of the evaluation team to independently reflect on five key messages from each of the site visits they conducted. These were captured immediately after each visit and sent to a member of the team who was not involved for analysis. A total of 205 key messages from 21 HEIs were provided.

The messages were qualitatively analysed by a researcher at RAND Europe who was not involved in the site visits (so as to not bias messages identified in future site visits). Messages were grouped together and used

to generate an initial set of ‘top-down’ themes. These were circulated to the team for comment and discussed during a series of internal workshops, where they were refined and iteratively developed.

#### 6.2.2. The ‘bottom-up’ approach

Each of the four tasks of this evaluation generated a rich volume of data and evidence of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. The richness, depth and breadth of these data have been demonstrated in the preceding chapters. Each task required its own approach to analysis of that data. The ‘bottom-up’ approach refers simply to the analysis of the data from each evidence stream and has been summarised in previous chapters.

#### 6.2.3. Triangulation across the evidence streams

Once the analysis of each evidence stream was completed, we triangulated between the different sources of data to ensure that the ‘top-down’ messages were supported by data and merited inclusion, as well as looking for any themes that emerged from the ‘bottom-up’ analysis. Messages and observations were refined according to the data coming from the relevant evidence streams. This process proceeded in an iterative fashion as the evaluation team worked through each set of analyses and continued testing different hypotheses to ensure that all information and data were captured and synthesised appropriately. This iterative process resulted in the continued refinement and assessment of the key findings to ensure each one was fully supported by a robust evidence base that drew upon all aspects of the evaluation (where appropriate). This resulted in a series of 12 key findings and observations, outlined in the accompanying *Findings and observations* report and summarised below.

### 6.3. Key findings

#### **Participants saw a number of benefits from the increased focus on the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014, along with other policies (such as Research Council UK's 'Pathways to Impact') and the broader 'impact agenda'**

Participants in REF 2014 identified a number of benefits resulting from their involvement in the process. This was evident from the site visits and surveys. Four key benefits were identified: the ability to identify and understand impact; the stimulation of broader strategic thinking about impact; the increased recognition within HEIs of those academics undertaking impact activities; and the opportunity to review and reaffirm relationships with external stakeholders. However, it should also be noted that about one in eight survey respondents stated that there were no benefits to undertaking the exercise. Furthermore, there were noticeable differences in attitudes within institutions. The staff responsible for managing institutional preparations for REF 2014 research impact assessment were considerably more positive about the process and identified more benefits than faculty staff, who held more equivocal views.

#### **The assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 was a significant new burden for HEIs**

It cost UK HEIs around £55m to prepare impact submissions as part of REF 2014. This is our 'best estimate' derived from data provided by 20 of the 21 HEIs and scaling that up, based on the number of submitted impact case studies and impact templates, for all UK HEIs. The estimated median costs of producing an impact case study were around £7,500 (median cost was £7,360, the range: £3,216–£26,890; interquartile range: £4,899–£11,011) and around £4,500 for an impact template (the median cost was £4,368, the range: £1,318–£13,523; interquartile range: £2,745–£6,631). There was evidence of economies of scale: the median cost per impact case study for HEIs producing 100 or more of them was £4,983, compared to £8,630 for those with less than 100. Although HEIs reported low levels of start-up cost at around 5 per cent, training accounted for about one-third of all labour costs

and less training may be required for future iterations of the REF.

#### **HEIs were able to identify and articulate their impact as part of REF 2014. However, views on guidance from the HE funding bodies for demonstrating research impact ranged widely, from full support to great concern**

Across the sector, 6,975 impact case studies were submitted for assessment as part of REF 2014, split evenly across Panels A, B, and D, but with Panel C generating 20 per cent more cases. Within our sample of HEIs, 1,997 impact case studies were submitted. The HEIs in our sample included submissions to all 36 Units of Assessment (UOAs), and interviews at the site visits covered 35 out of the 36 UOAs (with the exception of 'Anthropology and Development Studies (UOA24)'). Through the site visits and surveys, we established that HEIs were able to identify and articulate their impact. However, it is important to remember that whether they did so successfully will be determined by the panel assessment. Interviewees and survey respondents did identify a number of challenges in applying the 'rules' set out in the guidance documents provide by HE funding councils.<sup>50</sup> In particular, the requirement to gather evidence to support claims, the definition and concept of 'reach' and 'significance' as the criteria for assessing impact; the timeframe within which impact activity could be claimed (1 January 2008 to 31 July 2013), and the concept of institutional ownership of impact all presented challenges for HEIs preparing for research impact assessment.<sup>51</sup>

#### **The biggest challenges (and burdens) in preparing impact case studies (REF3b) were the requirement to 'evidence' impact and the need to develop an understanding of the concept of impact**

While many challenges and burdens emerged over the course of our evaluation, two in particular came to the fore in our analysis: the requirement to 'evidence' research impact in the case studies and the process of developing a shared understanding of the concept of impact within HEIs. Evidencing impact was particularly

<sup>50</sup> 'Rules' within the context of this report are the eligibility criteria against which the impact documents were produced. These were presented in the guidance to the sector provided by the funding bodies.

<sup>51</sup> Institutional ownership is the concept that impact can be claimed by the institution at which the underpinning research was done, rather than the current location of the research author(s). This is contrary to publications that move with individuals and can be claimed by the institution of which the academic is currently part.

challenging because (i) some types of impact were difficult to measure and evidence and (ii) the lack of records meant that evidence often had to be reconstructed. In addition, there was a perception among HEI staff that research users did not trust the confidentiality arrangements that had been put in place by the HE funding councils. It was acknowledged that these issues may have been exacerbated because this was the first assessment of impact for a REF cycle and in future information management systems will be in place to capture data on an ongoing basis. Hence we might reasonably expect both of these burdens to lessen in future.

### **HEIs perceived that the exercise had put an undue burden on research users, although this was not their experience**

Through the site visits we observed widespread concern that providing evidence and testimonials put an undue burden on the research user community. There was a perception in HEIs that engaging research users and beneficiaries had (often adversely) changed the dynamics of the relationship with key stakeholders. Interestingly, research users did not report that engagement in REF 2014 had been overly burdensome. However, it is important to note that we spoke to a limited sample of research users in this study.<sup>52</sup>

### **There was uncertainty about how panels will assess impact and this has led to unease in the sector**

There was a concern from the sector that the guidance provided by the HE funding councils could be interpreted in different ways by the panels when assessing HEIs' impact submissions. HEIs have been working with the REF 2014 definition of impact and the rules associated with its assessment since the guidance was published in July 2011. There was a feeling that the panels may be less familiar with the guidance and its intricacies and therefore may not follow the 'rules' when assessing impact case studies, or could decide that an impact case study was ineligible without proper consideration. In some instances uncertainty about panel behaviour when assessing the impact element of the submission encouraged risk-averse behaviour in the selection of case studies, as well as the exclusion of case studies where HEIs were concerned they might be ruled ineligible.

### **As a result of the impact agenda and changing culture, HEIs are changing their practices**

There is evidence of cultural change within HEIs. Institutional strategies and processes have been or are being put in place to maximise and evidence the impact of current and future research. There is a recognition that impact needs to be thought about from the outset and throughout the research life cycle. In some cases, institutions have raised the profile of research impact through inclusion of impact within their institutional research strategy or by the creation of a dedicated research impact strategy. Research impact strategies are also being developed at departmental and faculty levels, and some HEIs are using the REF 2014 impact templates (REF3a) to shape ongoing strategies within departments.

### **There was as much diversity of views and attitudes towards the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 within HEIs as there was between them**

HEIs within our sample had different attitudes towards the preparation process and were positive or negative in their attitude to varying extents. It was apparent through our visits that within HEIs there were a variety of attitudes towards the preparation process for the impact element of REF 2014. In general, central staff regarded the process as a positive experience. The benefits of the process were also perceived by some faculty staff, but there were proportionally fewer comments identifying these positive aspects and many more identifying negative aspects. In particular, they felt the process was disproportionately burdensome on a few individuals upon whom fell the work required to produce the impact element of the REF submission. The divergence in the views and attitudes presented here suggests that there is a risk that if the HE funding councils do not deal with the issues at the faculty level the culture shift and change in behaviour (described in the paragraph above) will not be sustained.

### **The impact case studies (REF3b) submitted may not be representative of the actual impact of research occurring within HEIs**

A recurring theme that was reported in the site visits was a concern that the impact case studies submitted were not representative of the actual impact occurring within

<sup>52</sup> A total of 29 randomly selected research users who provided a testimonial were approved by the HEIs in our sample.

HEIs. For example, it was reported that in some HEIs impact case studies were not included in the submission where there was uncertainty about their eligibility. This limited the range of research impacts presented. Staff at some HEIs expressed the view that their institution's submission did not capture all the impact they felt their research was having.

### **There is a concern that the impact agenda may begin to undermine 'blue skies' research**

Interviewees at the site visits noted (to varying degrees) that the broader 'impact agenda' (including Research Councils UK's 'Pathways to Impact') has implications for the types of research undertaken at UK universities. Specifically there was a concern that applied research will be promoted over basic 'blue skies' research. A more subtle concern was that the assessment of impact in the REF will prioritise research that can more easily demonstrate impact.

### **There is a strong desire among HEIs for the HE funding councils to indicate as soon as possible whether and how impact will be assessed for the next round of the REF**

It was clear from our site visits that HEIs want to know as soon as possible how impact will be assessed for the next round of the REF, so they can put in place the appropriate management systems. There are two

interrelated concerns: a desire for clear guidance from the HE funding councils, and a desire for stability and minimal changes to the 'rules' for demonstrating impact. Although there was not consensus on which 'rules' should be changed and how, the majority of HEIs in our sample felt that improvements or changes to the 'rules' should not be radical in nature. HEI staff felt they have invested time and financial resource in demonstrating research impact for REF 2014 and they want to retain the benefits of that investment.

### **There were examples of notable practices that HEIs identified as supporting the preparation of the impact element of REF 2014 submissions**

Across all the HEIs in our evaluation there were examples of notable practices identified as supporting the preparation of the impact element of REF 2014 submissions. These practices emerged from our site visits and from responses to our surveys of impact case study and impact template authors. We cannot make definitive statements about the relative merits of these practices, in part because the REF assessment is not yet complete and we do not yet know how successful different practices were in relation to the assessment outcome. However, we do comment on themes and issues that arose across multiple HEIs and which appeared likely to be helpful to others.

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## Appendix A List of panels and units of assessment for REF 2014

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Main panel	UOA	Unit of assessment
A	1	Clinical Medicine
	2	Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care
	3	Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy
	4	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience
	5	Biological Sciences
	6	Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science
B	7	Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences
	8	Chemistry
	9	Physics
	10	Mathematical Sciences
	11	Computer Science and Informatics
	12	Aeronautical, Mechanical, Chemical and Manufacturing Engineering
	13	Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials
	14	Civil and Construction Engineering
	15	General Engineering
C	16	Architecture, Built Environment and Planning
	17	Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology
	18	Economics and Econometrics
	19	Business and Management Studies
	20	Law
	21	Politics and International Studies
	22	Social Work and Social Policy
	23	Sociology
	24	Anthropology and Development Studies
	25	Education
	26	Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism

Main panel	UOA	Unit of assessment
D	27	Area Studies
	28	Modern Languages and Linguistics
	29	English Language and Literature
	30	History
	31	Classics
	32	Philosophy
	33	Theology and Religious Studies
	34	Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
	35	Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
	36	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management



## Appendix B Selection of HEIs

	First 'draw' of selected HEIs	Second round of reselection	Explanation
Group I (first 50%)	University of Southampton	University of Liverpool	The University of Liverpool was originally eliminated as the sample included Liverpool John Moores University, which ranked higher in the random number allocation. The University of Liverpool was reintroduced as a Group I HEI that is not part of the current QR evaluation that HEFCE are undertaking at the same time as this study.
	University of Oxford	University of Oxford	
	University of Leeds	University College London	The University of Leeds was eliminated as the sample included Leeds Metropolitan University, which ranked higher in the random number allocation. University College London was the next Group I HEI on the list.
	University of Cambridge	University of Cambridge	
	University of Nottingham	University of Nottingham	
	University of Bristol	University of Bristol	
	University of Birmingham	University of Birmingham	
	University of Liverpool	University of Durham	The University of Liverpool was originally eliminated as the sample included Liverpool John Moore University, which ranked higher in the random number allocation. The University of Durham was the next Group I HEI on the list.
Group II (next 30%)	Royal Holloway, University of London	Royal Holloway, University of London	
	Liverpool John Moores University	Brunel University	Liverpool John Moores University was eliminated as the sample included the reintroduced University of Liverpool. Brunel University was the next Group II HEI on the list.
	University of Portsmouth	University of Portsmouth	
	University of Kent	University of Kent	
	University of Central Lancashire	University of Central Lancashire	
	Lancaster University	University of Northumbria at Newcastle	Lancaster University was eliminated as the sample included the University of Central Lancashire, which was ranked higher in the random number allocation. The University of Northumbria at Newcastle was the next Group II HEI on the list.
Group III (final 20%)	Harper Adams University College	Royal College of Art	Harper Adams University College was eliminated as a non-art monotechnic and replaced with the first art-monotechnic HEI on the list, the Royal College of Art.
	Leeds Metropolitan University	Leeds Metropolitan University	
	Royal Academy of Music	Sheffield Hallam University	The Royal Academy of Music was eliminated as a non-art monotechnic HEI and replaced with the next Group III HEI on the list, Sheffield Hallam University.
	University of Chichester	University of Chichester	



## Appendix C Semi-structured protocol for site visit interviews

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### REF impact strategy

1. What was the institutional strategy for identifying and selecting case studies for submission?
2. What types of issues were considered in preparing this strategy?
3. How 'risky', or alternatively 'risk averse', would you describe your institutional strategy when it came to the impact submission?
4. What influence has the process of preparing the impact element had on the institution's overall REF 2014 submission, including the selection of Units of Assessment and researchers?
5. *Optional – if participated in the REF pilot:* What benefits and challenges did participating in the REF impact pilot create for your institutional impact submission?
6. How would you describe your REF governance strategy?
7. Was the structure for preparing for the impact assessment element of the REF approached any differently than the other elements of the REF?
12. How instructive did you find the criteria for impact assessment, namely 'reach' and 'significance', in preparing the case studies?
13. How instructive have these particular elements of the rules surrounding the impact element been when developing your case study?
  - a. The ratio of FTEs to case studies
  - b. Institutional ownership of impact
  - c. Research quality threshold
  - d. Research window
  - e. Impact window
  - f. Interdisciplinary research
  - g. Multi-institution research
  - h. Evidence requirements
  - i. Panel-specific guidance on impact and impact assessment procedures.
14. In your experience, were there any panels or UOAs that had an easier and/or more difficult time with aspects of the guidance and rules than others? If so, which ones and how?
15. What would you change to improve the impact assessment preparation process for future exercises?
  - a. At an institutional level?
  - b. At a policy level?

### Challenges

8. What have been the most significant challenges in preparing your institution's impact submission? Did these challenges differ by panel or UOA?
9. What kinds of burdens has preparing for the impact submission process had on your HEI?

### Rules

10. How instructive did you find the definition of impact that was provided in the REF guidance in preparing the case studies?
11. When preparing for the impact element did you refer to the outputs of the REF impact pilot, for example published exemplar case studies?

### Collecting evidence and engaging research users

16. What, if any, have been the benefits from engaging research user communities in the impact assessment preparation process?
  - a. For your researchers and institution?
  - b. For the end users?
17. What, if any, have been the challenges in engaging research user communities in the impact assessment preparation process?

- a. For your researchers and institution?
  - b. For the end users?
18. How difficult was it to obtain the different types of evidence you required?
  19. Was it easier to obtain evidence in some panels or UOAs compared to others?
  20. Have there been any costs associated with collecting evidence?
  21. Have there have been positive or negative changes in the way your HEI/UOA/panel engages with research user communities that are attributable to preparing for impact assessment?
  22. What proportion of research users contacted engaged with the process of gathering evidence?
  23. What reasons did people give for and against engaging with the process of creating impact case studies?

### Resource investment

24. What resources were used in preparing for impact assessment?
25. Did these resource investments differ by panel or UOA?
26. Roughly what proportion of time was spent on the impact element of the REF submission?
27. How would you describe the costs to your HEI of preparing impact submissions?
28. Did the costs differ by panel or UOA, and if so how?

### Impact templates (REF3a)

29. What were the specific benefits and challenges of producing the impact template document?
30. How helpful have the rules surrounding the impact template been when developing your template?
31. Will you be using the experience of preparing the impact template to inform activities within your institution?
32. What worked well about the process of producing the impact template?
33. What would you do differently if you were to repeat the impact preparation process? In particular with respect to impact templates.

### Benefits/opportunities

34. What have been the most significant benefits in identifying and describing your institution's impact?
35. Did these benefits differ by panel or UOA?
36. Has preparation for impact assessment through the REF provided tangible benefits for research?
37. Did the process of preparing for impact assessment through the REF change your institutional approach to achieving research impact? Do you think this change will endure?
38. Will you be using the experience of preparing the impact element to inform activities within your institution? Please discuss this in relation to both impact templates and impact case studies.
  - a. Impact templates [ask if haven't covered above]
  - b. Impact case studies.
39. What would you do differently if you were to repeat the impact preparation process? In particular with respect to:
  - a. Case studies
  - b. Impact templates [ask if haven't covered above].

### HEI research impact culture

40. Going into the REF, what was the attitude to impact within the institution?
41. Now that the REF has finished, what is the current attitude to impact? Has it changed?
42. What is working well in the REF impact process?
43. What could be changed to improve the process?
44. How does the REF impact assessment affect others in the sector?

## Appendix D NVivo code book for coding interviewee responses from the site visits

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### Nodes

- 01. Internal to HEI
  - 1.1. Culture
  - 1.2. REF impact strategy
  - 1.3. Resources
  - 1.4. Learning from the pilot
  - 1.5. Other
- 02. External to HEI applying rules and guidance from the HE funding bodies
  - 2.01. Definition of impact
  - 2.02. Criteria of reach
  - 2.03. Criteria of significance
  - 2.04. FTE case study ratios
  - 2.05. Institutional ownership of impact
  - 2.06. Underpinning research quality
  - 2.07. Research window
  - 2.08. Impact window
  - 2.09. Interdisciplinary research
  - 2.10. Multi-institutional research
  - 2.11. Panel specific guidance
  - 2.12. Software
  - 2.13. Other
- 03. External to HEI collecting evidence
  - 3.1. Research users
  - 3.2. Data
  - 3.3. Other
- 04. Internal to HEI preparing impact template (REF3a)
  - 4.1. Rules
  - 4.2. Other
- 05. External to HEI panel assessment behaviour
  - A. Perceived challenges
  - B. Perceived benefits
  - C. Consequences
  - D. Suggested improvements
    - D.1. HEI
    - D.2. Policy
  - E. Proposed good practices
  - U. Attitude towards the process
    - U.1. Negative
    - U.2. Positive
- V. Type of interviewee
  - V.1. Central

- V.2. Faculty
- W. Note worthy
- X. Good quotations
- Y. Panel and UOA
  - Y.1. Panel A
    - Y.1.1. UOA 1
    - Y.1.2. UOA 2
    - Y.1.3. UOA 3
    - Y.1.4. UOA 4
    - Y.1.5. UOA 5
    - Y.1.6. UOA 6
  - Y.2. Panel B
    - Y.2.1. UOA 7
    - Y.2.2. UOA 8
    - Y.2.3. UOA 9
    - Y.2.4. UOA 10
    - Y.2.5. UOA 11
    - Y.2.6. UOA 12
    - Y.2.7. UOA 13
    - Y.2.8. UOA 14
    - Y.2.9. UOA 15
  - Y.3. Panel C
    - Y.3.1. UOA 16
    - Y.3.2. UOA 17
    - Y.3.3. UOA 18
    - Y.3.4. UOA 19
    - Y.3.5. UOA 20
    - Y.3.6. UOA 21
    - Y.3.7. UOA 22
  - Y.3.8. UOA 23
  - Y.3.9. UOA 24
  - Y.3.10. UOA 25
  - Y.3.11. UOA 26
  - Y.4. Panel D
    - Y.4.1. UOA 26
    - Y.4.2. UOA 27
    - Y.4.3. UOA 28
    - Y.4.4. UOA 29
    - Y.4.5. UOA 30
    - Y.4.6. UOA 31
    - Y.4.7. UOA 32
    - Y.4.8. UOA 33
    - Y.4.9. UOA 34
    - Y.4.10. UOA 35
    - Y.4.11. UOA 36
- Z. Institution
  - Z.1. Brunel University
  - Z.2. Cardiff University
  - Z.3. Leeds Metropolitan University
  - Z.4. Royal College of Arts
  - Z.5. Royal Holloway, University of London
  - Z.6. Sheffield Hallam University
  - Z.7. University College London
  - Z.8. University of Birmingham
  - Z.9. University of Bristol
  - Z.10. University of Cambridge
  - Z.11. University of Central Lancashire
  - Z.12. University of Chichester

- Z.13. University of Durham
- Z.14. University of Kent
- Z.15. University of Liverpool
- Z.16. University of Northumbria at  
Newcastle
- Z.17. University of Nottingham
- Z.18. University of Oxford
- Z.19. University of Portsmouth
- Z.20. University of Stirling
- Z.21. University of the Highlands and  
Islands





## Appendix E Survey protocol for impact case study (REF3b) lead authors

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### Introduction

*Thank you for taking the time to take part in our survey.*

*RAND Europe has been commissioned by the higher education funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales to conduct an evaluation of the submission process for the impact element of the REF 2014. The aim of this project is to evaluate institutional preparations for the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 and to inform future exercises.*

*Your institution is one of 21 that has been selected to participate in the evaluation. As the lead author for one of the impact case studies we would like to understand your perceptions of the impact element of the REF 2014 process.*

*All information provided will be anonymised and not attributed to any individual or institution without specific consent.*

### Questions

1. How many academics were involved in the process of preparing the case study? *[Please enter a numerical value in the box below.]*

2. When did you start to develop your case study? *[Please indicate the month and year you started to develop the case study, subsequent to the release of the first REF guidance in July 2011.]*

3. When did your engagement with the case study finish? *[Please indicate the month and year your engagement with the case study finished.]*

4. How many hours do you estimate you spent developing your case study? *[If you were involved with more than one case study, please provide an average estimate of the time you spent on one case study.]*

5. How many hours do you estimate other academics (in total) spent developing your case study? *[If they were involved with more than one case study, please provide an average estimate of the time they spent on one case study.]*

6. What were the three main benefits of developing your case study?

1.

2.

3.

7. What were the three main challenges in developing your case study?

1.

2.

3.

8. What worked well in regard to your institution's REF impact strategy in developing the impact case study? *[Strategy can encompass elements of institutional approach and/or support provided, if relevant.]*

9. What worked well in regard to funding council policy and guidance in developing the impact case study?

10. What could be improved regarding your institution's REF impact strategy?

11. What could be improved regarding funding council impact policy and guidance?

12. To what extent were the following issues challenging or helpful in preparing your case study?

- The clarity of the REF's definition of impact

Very helpful

Somewhat helpful

Somewhat challenging

Very challenging

Not applicable

- The definition and concept of reach as a criterion for assessing impact

Very helpful

Somewhat helpful

Somewhat challenging

Very challenging

Not applicable

- The definition and concept of significance as a criterion for assessing impact
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable
- The concept of institutional ownership of impact, whereby impact belongs to the institution at which the research took place
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable
- 5-year timeframe for claiming impact
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable
- 20-year timeframe for underpinning research
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable
- 2\* threshold for quality of research
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable
- The requirement of gathering of evidence to support impacts claimed
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable
- Engaging with research users
 

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Not applicable

13. Please outline the reasons for your answers to the above question.



## Appendix F Survey protocol for impact template (REF3a) lead authors

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### Introduction

*Thank you for taking the time to take part in our survey.*

*RAND Europe has been commissioned by the higher education funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales to conduct an evaluation of the submission process for the impact element of the REF 2014. The aim of this project is to evaluate institutional preparations for the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 and to inform future exercises.*

*Your institution is one of 21 that has been selected to participate in the evaluation. As the lead author for one of the impact templates we would like to understand your perceptions of the impact element of the REF 2014 process.*

*All information provided will be anonymised and not attributed to any individual or institution without specific consent.*

### Questions

1. How many people were involved in preparing the impact template (e.g. writing, reviewing or providing input)? *[Please enter a numerical value in the box below.]*

2. When did you start to develop your template? *[Please indicate the month and year you started to develop the template, subsequent to the release of the first REF guidance in July 2011.]*

3. When did your engagement with the template finish? *[Please indicate the month and year your engagement with the template finished]*

4. How long, in hours, do you estimate that it took you to produce the template? *[If you are involved with more than one impact template, please provide an average estimate of the time you spent per impact template.]*

5. How long, in hours, do you estimate was invested by others involved to produce the template? *[If*

*you are involved with more than one impact template, please provide an average estimate of the time you spent per impact template.]*

[Redacted]

6. What were the three main benefits of developing the impact template?

1. [Redacted]

2. [Redacted]

3. [Redacted]

7. What were the three main challenges in developing the impact template?

1. [Redacted]

2. [Redacted]

3. [Redacted]

8. What worked well in regard to your institution's REF impact strategy in developing the impact template? *[Strategy can encompass elements of institutional approach and/or support provided, if relevant.]*

[Redacted]

9. What worked well in regard to funding council policy and guidance in developing the impact template?

[Redacted]

10. What could be improved regarding your institution's REF impact strategy?

[Redacted]

11. What could be improved regarding funding council impact policy and guidance?

[Redacted]

## Appendix G NVivo code book for analysing the qualitative survey responses from impact case study and impact template authors

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- A. Benefits
  - A.1. Identifying and understanding impact
  - A.2. Linking research to impact
  - A.3. Learning about impact and REF
  - A.4. Promotion or recognition
  - A.5. Review and affirm relationships
    - A.5.1. With end users
    - A.5.2. With collaborators
    - A.5.3. With colleagues
    - A.5.4. With funders
    - A.5.5. Other
  - A.6. Wider thinking about research
  - A.7. Gathering data
  - A.8. Benefits for the next REF
  - A.9. Articulating impact and REF
  - A.10. Thinking about strategy
    - A.10.1. Future
    - A.10.2. Current
  - A.11. Useful material
    - A.11.1. For funding applications
    - A.11.2. For promotional material
    - A.11.3. For publications
    - A.11.4. For other purposes
- A.12. Other
- A.13. No benefit
- B. Challenges
  - B.1. Gathering data
  - B.2. Internal strategy and information
  - B.3. Guidance
  - B.4. Time
  - B.5. Questioning panel behaviour
  - B.6. Identifying impact
  - B.7. First time
  - B.8. Process of writing
  - B.9. Demonstrating attribution
  - B.10. Stress and morale
  - B.11. Rules
    - B.11.1. Linking underpinning research and impact
    - B.11.2. Definition of impact
    - B.11.3. Research window
    - B.11.4. Impact window
    - B.11.5. Institutional impact
    - B.11.6. Reach and significance

- B.12. Format
  - B.12.1. Structure of template
  - B.12.2. Distinction between impact (REF3a) and environment template (REF3b)
  - B.12.3. Style of writing
- B.13. Participation in HEI
- B.14. Concept of impact and agenda
- B.15. Other
- B.16. No challenges
- C. Good practice
  - C.1. With HEIs
    - C.1.1. Feedback mechanisms
    - C.1.2. Coordination and support
    - C.1.3. Commitment to external partnerships
    - C.1.4. Having a bank of research linked to impact
    - C.1.5. Clear strategy
    - C.1.6. Other
    - C.1.7. None
  - C.2. Funding bodies' policy
    - C.2.1. Guidance was helpful
    - C.2.2. Format was good
    - C.2.3. Example case studies were helpful
    - C.2.4. Other
    - C.2.5. None
- D. Suggested improvements
  - D.1. Funding bodies' policy
    - D.1.1. More information on panel assessment
    - D.1.2. Rules
      - D.1.2.1. Linking underpinning research and impact
      - D.1.2.2. Definition of impact
      - D.1.2.3. Research window
      - D.1.2.4. Impact window
      - D.1.2.5. Institutional impact
      - D.1.2.6. Reach and significance
      - D.1.2.7. FTE ratio to impact case studies
    - D.1.3. Share example case studies
    - D1.4. Format and structure of template
    - D.1.5. Exclude impact as a criterion for REF
    - D.1.6. Level of guidance
    - D.1.7. Evidence requirements
    - D.1.8. Funding
    - D.1.9. Other
    - D.1.10. None
  - D.2. Within HEI
    - D.2.1. Have a clearer strategy
    - D.2.2. Increase internal support
      - D.2.2.1. Resources
      - D.2.2.2. Greater guidance



- D.2.2.3. Teaching and administrative relief
  - D.2.2.4. Increase staff involved
  - D.2.3. Systems to track impact
  - D.2.4. More recognition from HEI
  - D.2.5. Streamline processes
  - D.2.6. Other
  - D.2.7. None
- E. REF impact submission document
  - E.1. Impact case study (REF3b)
  - E.2. Impact template (REF3a)
- F. Institution
  - F.1. Brunel University
  - F.2. Cardiff University
  - F.3. Leeds Metropolitan University
  - F.4. Royal College of Arts
  - F.5. Royal Holloway, University of London
  - F.6. Sheffield Hallam University
  - F.7. University College London
  - F.8. University of Birmingham
  - F.9. University of Bristol
  - F.10. University of Cambridge
  - F.11. University of Central Lancashire
  - F.12. University of Chichester
  - F.13. University of Durham
  - F.14. University of Kent
  - F.15. University of Liverpool
  - F.16. University of Northumbria at Newcastle
  - F.17. University of Nottingham
  - F.18. University of Oxford
  - F.19. University of Portsmouth
  - F.20. University of Stirling
  - F.21. University of the Highlands and Islands



## Appendix H Protocols for individual and organisational interviews

Organisational interview protocol	Individual interview protocol
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was your organisation's awareness of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 prior to being contacted?</li> <li>2. How did the organisation support the development of REF impact case studies? How was the organisation approached by the case study author(s)? What was the organisation asked to provide? Was there organisational sign off or internal review of the evidence or testimonials provided?</li> <li>3. Were there benefits for your organisation as a result of engaging in the process of developing impact case studies as part of REF 2014?</li> <li>4. Were there challenges for your organisation as a result of engaging in the process of developing impact case studies as part of REF 2014?</li> <li>5. Were some types of evidence more difficult to provide for case studies than others? What were those types? What were the difficulties? Were there any specific difficulties in providing testimonials?</li> <li>6. What types of resources were required from your organisation in order to support the development of impact case studies?</li> <li>7. What, if anything, could be done to improve the process through which academic institutions engage with your organisation as part of the REF impact assessment process?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was your awareness of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 prior to being contacted?</li> <li>2. How did you support the development of REF impact case studies? How were you approached by the case study author(s)? What were you asked to provide? Did you need to seek additional support within your organisation? Was there any central oversight or was engagement devolved to an individual level? Was there organisational sign off or internal review of the evidence or testimonials provided?</li> <li>3. Were there benefits for you and your organisation as a result of engaging in the process of developing impact case studies as part of REF 2014?</li> <li>4. Were there challenges for you and your organisation as a result of engaging in the process of developing impact case studies as part of REF 2014?</li> <li>5. Were some types of evidence more difficult to provide for case studies than others? What were those types? What were the difficulties? Were there any specific difficulties in providing testimonials?</li> <li>6. Please provide an estimate of how much time (in hours) you spent supporting the case study author(s) and/or providing evidence as they prepared their case study? Were there any other resource requirements?</li> <li>7. What, if anything, could be done to improve the process through which academic institutions engage with you as part of the REF impact assessment process?</li> </ol>



## Appendix I Cost estimation worksheet

The purpose of this worksheet is to allow HEIs to build up an estimate of how much resource has been spent in preparing the impact submissions for the REF. We recognise that this task is complex and there will be many assumptions and estimates that need to be made. This worksheet provides categories for each resource type and makes explicit the assumptions to take into account.

There are two types of resource we would like you to consider in detail: time resources and financial resources. We provide definitions of each in the box below. In considering the resources you have spent on the impact element of the REF, it is important that only those resources specific to REF are considered. We recognise there is a wider government agenda about impact (e.g. RCUK impact pathways, etc.) and there could be resources which could be attributed to this. It is also important that we try to capture both start-up costs and ongoing resources. Start-up costs are those one-off costs that are associated with preparing impact submissions which you would not anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF and which you incurred **between July 2011 and the submission date of 29 November 2013**; ongoing or 'running' costs are those costs that you would anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF. One might think of it like the matrix below. We ask you to consider only those resources in the top half of the matrix.

	Start-up costs	Running costs
HEFCE REF Impact resources	✓	✓
Wider government impact agenda resources	X	X

The types of resources we would like you to consider are defined below.

### Time resources

There are many different kinds of staff time which may have been spent on preparing impact submissions. We will ask you to consider time in the following categories:

- Preparation time: time spent authoring, evidencing, reviewing and other support for developing REF3 documents (impact case studies and impact templates).
- Management time: time spent developing impact case study strategy at UOA/sub-panel or institutional levels, selecting impact case studies, and otherwise managing the process.
- Staff development time: time spent communicating directly with staff about the impact portion of the REF through seminars or meetings.
- Other time: for you to specify a category of time we may not be aware of.

All time should be captured in *days*. Please assume a 7.5-hour day.

### Financial resources

This category includes any direct costs incurred on preparing the impact case studies and templates. This includes direct costs in the following categories:

- External contractors to support the development of case studies or impact templates
- New databases, IT tools or materials used to help manage the impact submission process
- Costs incurred in developing/evidencing the impact case studies and templates
- Other costs, for you to specify a category of cost we may not be aware of.

Preparation time <sup>1</sup>	Instructions/assumptions	Days spent by academic staff <sup>2</sup>	Days spent by academic-related staff <sup>3</sup>	Days spent by contractors / academics external to organisation (unpaid) <sup>4</sup>	Total days	Start-up costs <sup>5</sup> vs running costs. What is the percentage of time spent that you estimate to be on start-up activities? <sup>6</sup>	Comments (please make any assumptions explicit)
1. Estimate of time spent by case study authors writing case studies	To cover time spent by impact case study author(s) writing the impact case studies. Though this question will be asked of impact case study authors, we would like you to provide an estimate from the institutional perspective.				0		
2. Evidencing impact case studies	To cover time spent at an institutional level in collecting, collating and otherwise fulfilling the requirements for evidence in the case studies.				0		
3. Reviewing impact case studies	To cover time spent at an institutional level reviewing impact case study drafts.				0		
4. Other support for the development of the impact case studies	To include time spent supporting the development of the impact case studies, but excluding time spent writing by impact case study authors				0		
5. Developing impact templates	Includes time to develop UOA-specific impact strategy, if this was not already in place, and writing of REF3A document				0		
6. Reviewing impact templates	To cover time spent reviewing draft impact templates				0		

### Explanatory notes

<sup>1</sup> Preparation time is defined as time spent by academic, academic-related and support staff employed at your institution in developing, evidencing and reviewing REF3 documents (impact case studies and impact templates). All time should be captured in days, assuming a 7.5 hour day, and should represent a total estimate (not per impact case study). Unless otherwise indicated, time spent by individual impact case study authors will be captured in our impact case study survey and should not be considered here.

<sup>2</sup> This category includes all staff on an academic contract; for the purpose of this exercise this should also include senior academic management (e.g. PVCs, Deans, Heads of Departments, etc.) and research assistants.

<sup>3</sup> This category includes all staff on an administrative, professional and clerical contract or a technical contract; for the purpose of this exercise this should include all professional services and support services staff (e.g. research offices, finance, HR, technical support, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Paid external contractors will be captured as a financial cost in the appropriate sheet.

<sup>5</sup> Start-up costs are those *one-off* costs that are associated with preparing impact submissions which you would not anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF and which you incurred since July 2011 to submission date of 29 November 2013; running costs are those costs that you would anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF.

<sup>6</sup> This is to estimate how much less time you anticipate spending in the next REF on the impact component on the basis of your experience in this round. Please answer using the drop-down quartiles. This is asked in order to identify time spent learning from experience or creating systems which can be 're-used' in the subsequent REF rounds.

Management time <sup>1</sup>	Instructions/assumptions	Days spent by academic staff <sup>2</sup>	Days spent by academic-related staff <sup>3</sup>	Total days	Start-up costs <sup>4</sup> vs running costs. What is the percentage of time spent which you estimate to be on start-up costs? <sup>5</sup>	Comments (please make assumptions explicit)
1. Developing impact case study strategy for the institution	This includes the time spent to create and agree the institutional strategy for the process of developing case studies			0		
2. Developing impact case study strategy for a UOA/sub-panel	This includes time spent to create and agree the strategy for the process of developing case studies for each UOA/sub-panel			0		
3. Selecting impact case studies	This should include time spent determining the strategy for selection, identifying best examples, and multiple rounds of selection (if relevant).			0		
4. Managing the overall process of preparing the impact submission	This includes coordination of the various people involved in the process, collation of drafts and convening/attending meetings, for example with UOA Leads, impact case study authors and institutional leadership.			0		
5. Other time spent managing the impact submission	This includes any other category of time spent managing the impact submission.			0		

**This next section asks you to consider time spent communicating with staff about REF impact:**

Instructions/assumptions	Number of events	Total time for all events	Total number of academic staff attending	Total number of staff attending	Comments (please make assumptions explicit)
1. Impact staff training To include staff development/training time which was specifically about the REF 2014 impact component.					

## Explanatory notes

<sup>1</sup> Management time is defined as time spent by academic, academic-related and support staff employed by your institution in relation to managing the submission process. It includes time spent developing the impact case study strategy at a UOA/sub-panel and institutional level, selecting impact case studies and managing the process. All time should be captured in days, assuming a 7.5 hour day, and should represent a total estimate (not per impact case study).

<sup>2</sup> This category includes all staff on an academic contract; for the purpose of this exercise this should also include senior academic management (e.g. PVCs, Deans, Heads of Departments, etc.) and research assistants.

<sup>3</sup> This category includes all staff on an administrative, professional and clerical contract or a technical contract; for the purpose of this exercise this should include all professional services and support services staff (e.g. research offices, finance, HR, technical support etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Start up costs are those one-off costs that are associated with preparing impact submissions which you would not anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF and which you incurred since July 2011 to submission date of 29 November 2013; running costs are those costs that you would anticipate in incurring in future rounds of REF.

<sup>5</sup> This is to estimate how much less time you anticipate spending in the next REF on the impact component on the basis of your experience in this round. Please answer using the drop-down quartiles. This is asked in order to identify time spent learning from experience or creating systems which can be 're-used' in the subsequent REF rounds.

Impact case study resource estimates <sup>1</sup>	Instructions/assumptions	Average cost per impact case study	Number of case studies	Total cost across all case studies	Fractional costs (if applicable) <sup>2</sup>	Start-up costs <sup>3</sup> vs running costs. What is the percentage of costs spent which you estimate to be on start-up costs? <sup>4</sup>	Comments (e.g. disciplinary differences worth noting, investment timelines, etc.)
External contractors	Direct costs to support the development of case studies			0			
Direct costs incurred for case studies	Direct costs incurred in developing / evidencing the impact case studies			0			
Other costs	Any other direct costs incurred			0			

#### Explanatory notes:

<sup>1</sup> This category includes the cost of external contractors and direct costs incurred on preparing the impact case studies.

<sup>2</sup> Fractional costs should be indicated where there are costs which cover the whole REF and for which there is only a fractional attribution for the impact component.

<sup>3</sup> Start up costs are those one-off costs that are associated with preparing impact submissions which you would not anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF and which you incurred since July 2011 to submission date of 29 November 2013; running costs are those costs that you would anticipate in incurring in future rounds of REF.

<sup>4</sup> This is to estimate how much less you anticipate spending in the next REF on the impact component on the basis of your experience in this round. Please answer using the drop-down quartiles. This is asked in order to identify costs which can be 're-used' in the subsequent REF rounds.

Impact Template Resource Estimates <sup>1</sup>	Instructions/Assumptions	Average cost per impact template	Number of impact templates	Total cost across all impact templates	Fractional costs (if applicable) <sup>2</sup>	Start-up costs <sup>3</sup> vs running costs. What is the percentage of costs spent which you estimate to be on start-up costs? <sup>4</sup>	Comments (e.g. disciplinary differences worth noting, investment timelines, etc)
External contractors	Direct costs to support the development of impact templates			0			
Direct costs incurred for impact templates	Direct costs incurred in developing impact templates			0			
Other costs	Any other direct costs incurred			0			

#### Explanatory notes:

<sup>1</sup> This category includes the cost of external contractors and direct costs incurred on preparing the impact templates.

<sup>2</sup> Fractional costs should be indicated where there are costs which cover the whole REF and for which there is only a fractional attribution for the impact component.

<sup>3</sup> Start up costs are those one-off costs that are associated with preparing impact submissions which you would not anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF and which you incurred since July 2011 to submission date of 29 November 2013; running costs are those costs that you would anticipate in incurring in future rounds of REF.

<sup>4</sup> This is to estimate how much less you anticipate spending in the next REF on the impact component on the basis of your experience in this round. Please answer using the drop-down quartiles. This is asked in order to identify costs which can be 're-used' in the subsequent REF rounds.



Systems resource estimates	Instructions/assumptions	Cost	Start-up costs <sup>1</sup> vs running costs. What is the percentage of costs spent which you estimate to be on start-up costs? <sup>2</sup>	Comments (what type of databases, IT tools or materials were purchased?)
New databases, IT tools or materials	For example new databases or management systems for the impact element. (Some tools may not be specific to the impact element and should be reported as a fractional cost.)			

Explanatory notes:

<sup>1</sup> Start-up costs are those one-off costs that are associated with preparing impact submissions which you would not anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF and which you incurred since July 2011 to submission date of 29 November 2013; running costs are those costs that you would anticipate incurring in future rounds of REF.

<sup>2</sup> This is to estimate how much less you anticipate spending in the next REF on the impact component on the basis of your experience in this round. Please answer using the drop-down quartiles. This is asked in order to identify costs which can be 're-used' in the subsequent REF rounds.

## New staff

Please indicate in the table below if any new staff were hired explicitly to support the impact component of REF, their FTE equivalents and average grade.

Number of new staff hired	FTE equivalent (average)	Grade (average)	Comments