

Council Meeting

For discussion

Funding Bodies' Consultation on the next Research Excellence Framework

Agenda: 10
HEFCW/15/90

Disclosable

06/11/2015

1 Issue

- 1.1 This paper invites the Council to approve a consultation document on the next Research Excellence Framework (REF).

2 Corporate Planning Implications / Rationale for paper

- 2.1 Promoting strong and sustainable research performance in Wales is one of the Council's core objectives, as set out in our Corporate Strategy. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is central to this objective. It enables us to benchmark the Welsh HE sector's performance against the rest of the UK, and provides the basis for the selective allocation of research funding (QR).
- 2.2 The Council considered an initial paper on the next REF at its meeting in July and agreed to work with the other UK higher education funding bodies to develop more detailed proposals as the basis for formal UK-wide consultation with the sector.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 The Council is invited to:
- i. approve the draft consultation document for publication (attached at **Annex A**).
 - ii. delegate authority to the Chief Executive to approve, on behalf of HEFCW, the final wording of the consultation document.
 - iii. delegate authority to the Chair and Chief Executive to agree, on behalf of HEFCW, the timing for publication following the UK spending review.
 - iv. note that the outcomes of the consultation and proposed arrangements for the next REF will be presented to the Council at a future meeting.

4 Timing for decisions

- 4.1 A decision at this meeting of the Council is necessary in order for the consultation to be ready for publication following the UK spending review.

5 Council members' interests

- 5.1 No conflicts of interests have been declared in advance of the meeting.

6 Further information

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7 Proposals for the next Research Excellence Framework

Progress to Date

- 7.1 The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a UK-wide assessment of the quality of research in universities. It is conducted jointly by the four UK higher education funding bodies and is managed by a REF Team based at HEFCE. The outcomes of the 2014 REF were published in December 2014. In view of the long lead time for such exercises, the UK higher education funding bodies need to start planning for the next REF.
- 7.2 At its meeting in July, the Council considered initial proposals for a number of potential changes to arrangements for the next REF, arising from evaluation and feedback from the 2014 REF. It was agreed that more detailed proposals would be presented to the Council at a subsequent meeting, and that these would form the basis for a UK-wide consultation with the sector.
- 7.3 We had originally planned to submit the draft consultation document to the September meeting of Council, for publication in October. However, as we reported to the Council in September, following a request to HEFCE from the BIS Minister for Universities and Science, the consultation on the next REF has been delayed until after the UK spending review.
- 7.4 Subject to approval of the draft consultation document by the Councils (or equivalent) of the four UK higher education funding bodies, it is the funding bodies' intention to launch a UK-wide consultation following the spending review. The outcomes will be reported to the Council at a future meeting

The Proposals for the next REF

- 7.5 As indicated in the July Council paper, the funding bodies consider that an exercise broadly similar to the 2014 REF remains the most appropriate mechanism for continuing to support the research base through the selective allocation of funds and provision of reputational and accountability information. The draft consultation document therefore proposes an exercise:

- taking place in 2020
- based on peer review (informed by metrics, where appropriate); and
- assessing research outputs, impact and environment.

In developing the proposals, the funding bodies have been mindful of the level of burden indicated, and have identified where certain options may offer a more deregulated approach than in the previous framework.

- 7.6 The development of the full proposals for the next REF has been informed by a process of soft consultation undertaken by the funding bodies over the summer. This included two UK-wide workshops, arranged by HEFCE, which considered staff selection and impact issues in more detail. Representatives from the Welsh HE sector attended both of these workshops.
- 7.7 The two workshops were held to enable more detailed discussion of the two issues most commonly identified in sector feedback and evaluation work. Discussion at the impact workshop indicated that there were a wide variety of opinions on what changes should be implemented for a future REF. The staff selection workshop

indicated a general agreement that some level of selectivity should still be available to HEIs, but differing opinions on the details of implementation.

- 7.8 As part of the soft consultation process, we also outlined the initial thinking on the next REF to a Unis Wales' meeting of Pro Vice-Chancellors (Research) in June.
- 7.9 The draft consultation document is attached at **Annex A**. The areas covered by the consultation are:
- Overall approach
 - Unit of assessment structure
 - Expert panels
 - Staff
 - Collaboration
 - Outputs
 - Impact
 - Environment
 - Outcomes and Weighting
 - Proposed Timetable.
- 7.10 Of the proposals set out in the document, two of the more significant areas for consultation relate to the outcomes from the assessment:
- consideration of whether the 4* quality level should be split into two, to better reflect the panels' ability to make more granular judgements at this quality level (see paragraph 107); and
 - a proposal to increase the weighting of impact to 25% of the overall quality profile (see paragraphs 108-110).
- 7.11 The draft consultation paper will be considered by the Councils (or equivalent) of all four UK HE funding bodies. We are therefore requesting delegated authority for the Chief Executive to agree the final wording of the document on behalf of HEFCW in the light of any comments which may be made by the other HE funding bodies as part of that process.
- 7.12 In addition, in recognition of the request by the BIS Minister for Universities and Science to delay the consultation, we recognise the possibility that the consultation may need to be modified subject to any further questions raised by the Minister.
- 7.13 We are therefore also requesting delegated authority for the Chair and Chief Executive to agree, on behalf of HEFCW, the timing for publication of the consultation document following the UK spending review.

The Council is invited to:

- i. approve the draft consultation document at Annex A for publication***
- ii. delegate authority to the Chief Executive to approve, on behalf of HEFCW, the final wording of the consultation document***
- iii. delegate authority to the Chair and Chief Executive to agree, on behalf of HEFCW, the timing for publication following the UK spending review.***

Consultation Process

- 7.14 The consultation will be open for a period of twelve weeks. During that period, HEFCE will run a number of consultation events, which will be open on a UK-wide basis.
- 7.15 Following the close of consultation and analysis of responses, we intend to put a further paper to the Council in mid-2016. That paper will invite the Council to consider the outcomes of the consultation and the proposed arrangements for a future exercise. It will also include full budget proposals and risk and impact analyses. It is at that stage that the Council will be asked to confirm commitment to a future exercise.

The Council is invited to note that the outcomes of the consultation and the proposed arrangements for the next REF will be presented to a future meeting of the Council.

8 Financial implications

- 8.1 There are no new financial implications arising from this paper. At its meeting in July, the Council approved a contribution of £10,865 for HEFCW's share of the costs of the REF developmental work in the period to April 2016. A full budget for the next REF will be presented to the Council in mid-2016, alongside the outcomes of the consultation.

9 Communications implications

- 9.1 We envisage that a UK-wide consultation on the proposals for the next REF will be published following the UK spending review. We will publish a copy of the consultation document on the HEFCW website and issue email alerts to our sector.
- 9.2 All UK HEIs will submit their consultation responses to HEFCE, using an online form. HEFCE will subsequently provide HEFCW with copies of all of the responses from HEIs and other bodies in Wales.
- 9.3 We anticipate that HEFCE will handle any media interest in the consultation on behalf of all four UK HE funding bodies.

10 Diversity and Equal Opportunities implications

- 10.1 As in the 2014 REF, the funding bodies will pay close attention to diversity and equal opportunities issues throughout the design and conduct of the next REF. Measures already mentioned in the proposals include:
- A thorough exploration of the issues surrounding the selection of staff
 - Improved arrangements for recruiting panel members, in order to promote equality and diversity.

11 Risk Assessment

Risk	Action to address risk
There is a risk that a further Research Excellence Framework may not command the support of the HE sector, or may be regarded as overly-burdensome.	The proposals have already been tested informally with the HE community through a process of soft consultation over the summer. They will now be subject to a formal UK-wide consultation, and arrangements will be finalised in the light of the consultation responses.
There is a risk that changes in political direction relating to the role of research assessment might alter the aims or direction of policy.	There is close engagement with stakeholders.
A significant change to the balance or amount of HEFCW's research funding could affect the relevance of REF as a means of directing the selective allocation of funding.	The Council is giving priority to maintaining QR funding insofar as possible.
There is a risk that the arrangements for the next REF may not align with the strengths of the Welsh HE sector.	We will ensure that our sector is fully engaged with the consultation process, and will raise any issues of particular concern through our membership of the REF Steering Group.
The outcomes of the next REF might provide insufficient differentiation for funding purposes at the top end of the scale.	The consultation includes consideration of whether it would be appropriate to extend the assessment scale.