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The Research Excellence Framework as a resource for the field

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For anyone interested in educational research, the results of the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 are grounds for celebration. Comparing one REF to the next always requires caution, but we can say that the overall profile of educational research has strengthened. Between REF 2014 and REF 2021 the proportion of outputs judged to be world-leading (4*) rose from 21.7 per cent to 29.8 per cent; those scoring 3* and 4* combined rose from 61.6 per cent to 67.9 per cent. The change in impact quality is just as marked, with that judged as outstanding (4*) increasing from 42.9 per cent to 51.1 per cent.

While such figures are important, I would argue that there are other more subtle, complex and nuanced insights to be gained through understanding REF processes and by looking in more detail at the many things it puts into the public domain. REF 2021 looked at research activity across the preceding seven years. In the case of education, a sub-panel of 35 people, drawn from nominations made by learned societies and others, assessed 83 institutional submissions comprising 5,278 outputs, 232 impact case studies and 83 environment statements.

Submissions reflected the work of 2,367 individual researchers, though it is vital to remember that REF is concerned with the quality of research *in institutions* and does not produce any data at the individual level. Institutions must be selective in what outputs they include, and therefore a great deal of research activity goes on which is not directly represented in REF. This is a crucial point, but I disagree with those who suggest that it compromises the validity of the exercise. REF measures what it claims to measure, and institutions control which examples of their research are included. Other key features of the process include: the harnessing of expertise in a fresh process of peer review; clarity of criteria; broad consistency in the process over time; systems to facilitate transparency, moderation, calibration and to minimise unconscious bias; and rigorous avoidance of conflicts of interest. Collectively, these features put REF in a different league to other quality regimes. (The contrast is perhaps greatest with the Teaching Excellence Framework [TEF] – see for example Ashwin, 2022.)

Outputs

There is only space here to mention some highlights from the many observations contained in the sub-panel's report (see REF, 2022). The report offers general reflections about quality against the REF criteria, noting for example that outputs gaining the highest grades: 'demonstrated their originality, significance and rigour in diverse ways'; that they 'included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies...[with] no strong association between research excellence and particular methods or approaches'; that they 'included theoretically driven as well as empirically driven work'. Outputs directly concerned with aspects of professional practice 'gained grades across the whole range, though those gaining lower grades included some that were limited to descriptive or experiential accounts'. A general

observation is that 'whilst clearly of value, lower-graded outputs were often characterised by one or more of the following: over-claiming of contribution to knowledge; a weak location in a field; insufficient attention to the justification of samples or case selection; under-development of criticality and analytical purchase'. A more detailed commentary follows in the report, organised under three headings: sectors of educational provision; substantive issues; and interdisciplinarity & methodological orientations. Further sections set out sub-panel reflections on the nature of impact case studies and environment statements. Together with the submissions and the outcomes (also all in the public domain), the report offers a kind of 'critical friendship' to the field of educational research.

Doctoral completions

Doctoral programmes are an important indicator of the vitality and sustainability of research environments. Across education submissions, 6,155 doctoral degrees were awarded in the REF period, a 70 per cent increase on the 2014 figure of 3,625. Of the 12 social sciences units in Main Panel C, education had by far the highest rate of doctoral completions per staff FTE (full-time equivalent) and its total number of completions is second only to those in business & management, which had significantly more submissions and around double the staff count of education.

REF as a resource

Clearly, a main purpose of REF is to provide assessments of research quality, which then directly and indirectly affect research funding. But REF gives us much more than this, furnishing insights into the overall activity and helping to identify avenues for further development. An example is the sub-panel's view that while there were exceptions, little of the research seen focused on educational engagements with climate change or education for environmental sustainability.

Another example – rather different, though also a serious concern – comes from the REF data on external research income across all submissions. This averaged £58 million per year in the REF 2014 period whereas for REF 2021 it was £55 million. Had this funding remained constant in value, the annual average would have been £65.7 million². REF shows us that in real terms this funding of educational research has reduced by an average of £10.7 million per year (or over £70 million across the seven years).

This decline is even more alarming if seen as investment against total UK public expenditure on education. Education touches everyone (shaping life chances, knowledge, beliefs, skills, economic and social prosperity, democratic participation, lifestyle, health and so on) and is the second highest area of public spending. At roughly 0.053 per cent of £104 billion (in 2019–20 – see IFS, 2021), £55 million is a very small investment indeed.

The report's final paragraph is worth quoting in full.

'Educational research plays a vital role in supporting the many organisations, individuals and activities involved in education, providing independent analysis and insight to promote reflection, understanding, effectiveness, improvement, and renewal. The sub-panel saw strong evidence that educational research has impressive national and international reach and responds well to the needs of policy,

relevant professional groups, the public and specific communities. Crucially, however, the best educational research is not confined to the role of a supplier responding to demands that are articulated by – or on behalf of – these stakeholders: educational research is also itself a vital source of new ideas, insights, perspectives, and challenges to current thinking, policy and practice, making a valuable and distinctive contribution to democratic life.’

REF, 2022, p. 169

¹David was chair of the REF 2021 Education Sub-panel; he writes here in a personal capacity.

²Calculated by taking the mid-year of each REF period (2011 and 2018) and using the Bank of England online inflation calculator: www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator.

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