

## Governance & Policy Office: KE & Impact Support

### How To Guide No. 5: Characteristics of a good REF2014 impact case study

Have you been approached by your Divisional Impact Ambassador or Research Group Lead to think about drafting a potential impact case study for submission to REF2021 based on your research? If so, congratulations! The weighting for impact has increased to 25% of the overall submission to REF2021, so each impact case study will be highly valued by the University and will reflect the very best of the best. We now have the benefits of insights and learning from REF2014, so we know more about what will 'tick the right boxes' for the reviewers.

Thanks to a number of formal analyses that were conducted on the impact case studies submitted to REF2014, the characteristics shared by case studies that were considered to be 4\* (outstanding in terms of reach and significance) and 3\* (very considerable in terms of reach and significance) have been identified. This guide is a compilation of the main points featured in a number of these analyses, which will help you focus when thinking about how to approach drafting a strong impact case study for REF2021.

Impact case study (REF3b)	REF2014 Research Excellence Framework
Institution:	
Unit of Assessment:	
Title of case study:	
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)	
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)	
3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)	
4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)	
5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)	

We are expecting the REF2021 HEFCE case study template to be released shortly. HEFCE has stated that it will be revised to make it more 'directed' and more standardised, with a set of mandatory fields to cover introductory material to make the assessment easier, such as information relating to the time period, research funder and employment of staff involved in the associated research. This guide will be updated as soon as we have further clarification from HEFCE.

The REF2014 impact case study template can be seen on the left, with each case study including a summary of the impact, a narrative description of the underpinning research which led to the impact, a list of up to six underpinning publications, a narrative description of the details of the impact and a list containing evidence of the impact.

### What was impact in REF2014?

In REF2014 impact was defined as *"an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia."*



## Writing impact case studies: Getting the narrative right

As a result of the analyses conducted on the REF2014 impact case studies, we are in a much better position to advise on how to approach writing a case study for REF2021. Steven Hill, Head of Research Policy at HEFCE, confirmed that the ways in which REF2014 impact case studies were written proved crucial in many cases: ***“Good impact was necessary but not sufficient to get a good score. It is about delivering great impact but also about conveying that impact effectively”***. Thinking about how to write a case study is therefore very important, as the narrative in 2014 was highly influential in generating confidence in the impact for the reviewers.

Strong case studies had good narrative structure, with compelling and clear internal logic – showing definitively how the research had led to the impact being claimed and how the evidence provided linked to the impact.

The narrative in the underpinning research and in the details of the impact sections answered the “who”, “what”, “why”, “when”, “where” and “how” questions. There was a clear story of change having arisen from the research and leading to impact.

Simple, easy-to-follow coherent, chronological and linear narratives describing the journey to impact scored highly. A chronological story of development: the problem was identified, the research was conducted and the problem alleviated. The relationship between the research, the impact and the nature of the benefits arising from the research was clearly explained.

Case studies were written so that reviewers without specialist knowledge could understand the narrative (lay people / research users took part in the assessment of impact, not just academics).

The narrative needed to be explicit in naming institutions and the people who enabled the impact to occur. Many high-scoring case studies involved interdisciplinary teams.

The case study was concise and used clear language. It had a clear presentation which made it easy to read: sub-headings, adequate spacing. Pictures or diagrams were well received by reviewers. Cases were marked down for poor presentation and for being verbose.

The case study was brought to life with quotes that illustrated the impact with greater resonance than could otherwise be done with formal language. If these quotes were from people with high profile and relevant job titles, this then added significant credibility to the case study, as well as some lived experience.

## Main points to consider when drafting the text for each of the case study template sections

Indicative guidance on how to approach each section of the impact case study template in REF2014 was given in the Assessment framework and guidance on submissions document in Annex G. It was so important to read the guidance carefully and answer the 'exam questions' provided.

Main Panel A (UoAs 1-6) had expected to receive case studies in the spheres of the economy, society, culture, public policy and services, health production, environment, international development or quality of life, whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally.

The Panel's feedback stated that the best impact case studies for that Panel were characterised by:

- **a clear and compelling narrative linking the research programme to the claimed impact;**
- **verifiable evidence (qualitative or quantitative) to support the claimed impact provided in the text of the case study;**
- **where appropriate, spread of the impact beyond the immediate beneficiaries to a much broader and possibly global audience.**

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### Title of case study

In REF2014 titles tended to focus on research over impact and usually did not add much clarity because of this. A good title for an impact case study needed to be descriptive of the impact. Some examples of titles from 4\* case studies in UoAs 1-4 include:

"Fewer suicides worldwide following changes in policy and practice influenced by University of X research"

"Transforming care for cancer survivors"

"Health benefits, increased public awareness and changes in national policy result from the successful implantation of the first tissue-engineered trachea, created using the patient's own stem cells"

"New businesses, commercial investment and adoption of new technology result from antigen-specific peptide immunotherapy development"

"Improving treatment guidelines, life expectancy and access to life insurance for HIV positive people"

"Patients, organisations providing clinical guidelines and commercial companies benefit from new approach to comparing multiple healthcare options"

## **1. Summary of the impact (100 words)**

In this section authors were asked to state briefly what specific impact was being described in the case study.

Good summaries had a strong opening, headlining the research and impacts. They included key facts and figures and clearly identified the impact (s) claimed.

The more successful case studies were able to articulate impact clearly and concisely in the summary, with some also quickly noting the strongest examples of evidence as well.

The summary clearly stated the impact at the outset. If the impact cannot be summed up clearly, the advice is to re-evaluate the case study.

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## **2. Underpinning research (500 words)**

This section was a narrative account of how the research had evolved. It described more than publications and goals. Strong examples for section 2 clarified the nature of the research and detailed the methodologies and the key findings in an accessible way.

Over 80% of REF cases included underpinning research that was multidisciplinary. Where research was collaborative, the unique contribution of the submitting university was described.

The outputs selected had to be demonstrably of 2\* quality (research that was recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour). It was recommended that they included evidence to prove this. Examples could have included citation data, inclusion in a peer-reviewed journal, winning prizes or other esteem markers.

Outstanding case studies gave a clear indication of how the underpinning research and the research outputs were credibly linked to impact. They explained the research clearly and made basic eligibility for a case study obvious and explicit, e.g. by plainly listing the number of years that researchers had spent in the submitting institution or highlighting proof of research excellence by italicising grant information, awards, publications etc. This meant less work for the reviewer and more time to assess actual impact.

Specific details about the research were provided: researchers' names and positions in the HEI, and dates and locations of all research activity.

Authors ensured that they made it clear that eligibility criteria had been met (e.g. the research had been conducted within the eligible research period; the researcher had been employed by the submitting university at the time etc.).

The case study demonstrated that the submitting university's research made a "material and distinctive" contribution to the impact which it was claiming, i.e. it needed to demonstrate that the impact would not have happened or would have been significantly reduced without the contribution of the research.

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### 3. References to the research (maximum of 6)

This section provided references to key outputs from the research described in Section 2 and provided evidence about the quality of the research.

Outputs needed to be a minimum of 2\* quality. You could put in an explicit statement about the quality of the research and Panel criteria provided advice on the type of evidence that could be provided. For Panel A, additional indicators of the quality of the underpinning research could include evidence of peer-reviewed funding: good examples contained details about who the grant was awarded to; the grant title; the sponsor; the period of the grant, with dates; the value of the grant.

Authors ensured that the research had been published within the relevant period.

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### 4. Details of the Impact (maximum of 750 words)

In REF2014 impact was defined as “*an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia*”.

Good case study authors were honest and clear about the impact and did not overstate or exaggerate it. They outlined as clearly as possible the ‘effect, change or benefit’ that their research had made.

They provided a narrative with supporting evidence to explain:

- a) how the research had underpinned the impact *and*
- b) the nature and extent of the impact.

Good examples provided contextual information – societal challenge, opportunity, market size, beneficiary, benefit etc. E.g. if the impact was a new drug, how many people used it/could use it?

The more specific the impact, the easier it was to argue and evidence it.

There was an explanation of how the beneficiaries were engaged.

This section provided details of the beneficiaries – who or what community constituency or organisation has benefited, been affected or impacted on? It clearly identified who benefited from the work and explained how the beneficiaries had been engaged.

The more clearly stated the impact, the more obvious the quality of the case study. Some authors used headings and other organisational techniques.

The authors clearly communicated and demonstrated the reach and significance of the impact:

**Reach** was understood as the extent and diversity of the communities, environments, individuals, organisations or any other beneficiaries that have benefited or have been affected, i.e. how far the impact had spread.

**Significance** was understood as the degree to which impact had enriched, influenced, informed, or changed policies, opportunities, perspectives, or practices of communities, individuals or organisations, i.e. the intensity of the influence or effects of the research.

Case studies were brought to life with quotes that illustrated the impact with greater resonance than could otherwise have been done with formal language. If quotes are from people with high profile and relevant job titles, this adds significant credibility to your case study, as well as some lived experience.

The context in which the impact had taken place was described, in order to give an indication of its significance. The original objectives of the research were also set out, in order to show the intended reach. Case studies that maximised the possible reach of the research were likely to score highly.

It appears that in the majority of UoAs, cases which scored highly did not necessarily demonstrate that impact was international, but rather that the intended beneficiaries had been reached.

Dividing this section by beneficiary or impact type could be a useful device to ensure the focus was on beneficiaries and final impacts.

Anecdotal accounts suggest that portfolio or 'mixed bag' impacts did not score as highly as clear narratives on specific impacts.

Key facts and figures were easily identifiable in the examples of corroborating evidence given.

Strong case studies included evidence within the narrative text that was listed in section 5 (e.g. a quote from a testimony; references to reports etc.). Any evidence that authors wanted to use had to appear in this section. This was because the Panel members did not have easy access to the evidence in section 5 (they had to submit formal audit query requests to HEFCE in order to see them), so case studies that incorporated evidence from section 5 into section 4 were viewed favourably.

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## **5. Sources to corroborate the impact (i.e. evidence – maximum of 10 examples)**

It was crucial to provide concrete evidence of the reach and significance of the impact, as this was what the Panel scored. The evidence needed to be appropriate, specific to the research, compelling and clearly articulated. The more clearly a case study was evidenced and linked to excellent research, the easier it was for the reviewers to see the impact at work.

Impact evidence was robust and was specific to the type of impact that had occurred and clearly demonstrated that a difference had been made.

Impact evidence was more compelling when it was from a third party, empirical and referred specifically to the research or the researchers.

Strong evidence offered a diverse mix of independent quantitative and qualitative sources that directly supported all the claims being made.

In strong case studies, authors were precise about who exactly had used their work, how they had used it and the effects it had had.

In the most successful case studies, corroborative evidence itself made reference to the research and did not merely infer a relationship.



When a case study included multiple impact claims, careful consideration was given to omitting any weakly evidenced claims.

For Main Panel A, reports, testimonials and articles were the three main sources of evidence submitted.

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## In Summary



**MANCHESTER**  
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The University of Manchester

### What made a good REF 2014 impact case study?

- Had a descriptive title which explained what it was about
- Had a concise summary which spelled out the case in 100 words or less
- The research was clearly 2\* (quality that was recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour) or above in research quality
- It was clear that the research underpinned the impact
- It was self-contained (i.e. included evidence from section 5 in section 4)
- The narrative had a clear focus
- The impact was well evidenced regarding reach and significance
- There was a clear pathway to impact resulting from the research
- The author had followed the HEFCE guidelines

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## Other

- Examples of 4\* case studies can be found on the [Fast Track Impact website](#) in the Resources section.
- The searchable [REF2014 impact case studies database](#) contains the majority of the 6,975 cases submitted to REF2014.
- Useful articles on lessons learned from REF2014 impact case studies include:

- Stephanie Swain, University of Cambridge, Impact case studies: Lessons learned from REF2014  
<https://www.research.vet.cam.ac.uk/staff-information/impact/useful-documents/impact-recommendations-v3.pdf/view>
- Steven Hill, HEFCE, Research impact: learning lessons from the REF (this article has links to many of the formal case studies analyses conducted by a variety of organisations, such as RAND, KCL and Digital Science)  
<http://blog.hefce.ac.uk/2015/11/10/research-impact-learning-lessons-from-the-ref/>
- Natalie Wall, Middlesex University, Distinguishing between a 4\* and 3\* Impact Case Study in REF2014  
<https://mdximpact.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/ref-report.pdf>
- Chris O'Brien, [Bulletin](#), Research impact case studies: tips for success from the assessors  
<https://www.bulletin.co.uk/31441/research-impact-case-studies-tips-success-assessors/>
- Digital Science, [The Societal and Economic Impacts of Academic Research](#) (this report provides an analysis of the evidence types used in REF2014 impact case studies)

## Contacts

The KE & Impact Officers are able to advise on all things research impact-related:

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