How much was an impact case study worth in REF2014?

By Prof Mark Reed and Dr Simon Kerridge

When the UK Government integrated impact into the Research Excellence Framework in 2014, it signaled how seriously it took the societal and economic impact of the research it funds. But how seriously? The answer is something like £308,000 (£44,000 per year between 2015/16-2021/22) for the most significant and far-reaching impacts. Given that many of the people who were responsible for leading these impact case studies earn salaries less than this, for most people, that's taking things pretty seriously.

We looked at Units of Assessment in REF2014 where a University had all its case studies graded as either 3* or 4* and found that:

- A 4* impact case study was worth £44,048 on average (range: £12,971-70,946) in 2016/17 (Table 1)
- A 3* impact case study was worth £11,813 on average (range: £3,415-29,186) in 2016/17 (Table 2)

The formula for calculating annual recurring payments for each of these case studies between now and the next REF may vary, but we can expect similar levels of funding per case study per year between now and 2021.

The 3* case study Mark Reed led for Birmingham City University was worth £4,631 per year as part of a small submission (four full-time staff). A similar case study based on the same impact was submitted as part of a larger submission to different Unit of Assessment by the University of Leeds, and was probably worth £17,306 per year (assuming it too scored 3* and based on assumptions about the split between 3* and 4* case studies and the 4:1 funding ratio between 4* and 3* work). To put this into context, the Sustainable Uplands project, upon which these two case studies were based started in 2004, and work building on the project was still ongoing in 2014 – that's 10 years worth of work. The project was awarded approximately £1M over four phases from the Research Councils.

Impact is likely to be worth proportionally more in the next REF, given the recommendation that has been made to integrate the "impact template" with "environment", so 100% (rather than 80%) of the funds allocated to impact in the next REF will probably come from the case studies themselves (see HEFCE consultation on second Research Excellence Framework).

Table 1: Quality Rated (QR) funding allocated by HEFCE in 2016/17 per 4* impact case study, based on the case studies from Units of Assessment where 100% of the impact sub profile was graded at 4*

Institution	UOA	UOA name	Number of case studies	2016/17 QR allocation per case study (£)
Birkbeck College	04	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	4	39892
Goldsmiths' College	35	Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts	4	30820
Imperial College London	13	Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials	10	46607
Kingston University	29	English Language and Literature	3	48857
Queen Mary University of London	35	Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts	3	46631
Royal Northern College of Music	35	Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts	2	42077
London School of Economics	22	Social Work and Social Policy	6	50216
London School of Economics	27	Area Studies	3	44053
London School of Economics	36	Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library and Information Management	2	47080
The University of Leicester	36	Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library and Information Management	5	12971
The University of Nottingham	03	Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy	8	41679
The University of Nottingham	25	Education	3	46735
The University of Sheffield	25	Education	2	41321
The University of Southampton	03	Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy	4	65212
University of Southampton	35	Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts	3	58627
University of Warwick	06	Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science	2	47633
University of York	22	Social Work and Social Policy	4	47875
The University of York	23	Sociology	3	37996
University College London	22	Social Work and Social Policy	2	40854
University of Bedfordshire	29	English Language and Literature	2	27023
University of Bristol	01	Clinical Medicine	9	70946
University of Bristol	02	Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care	8	70505
University of Bristol	18	Economics and Econometrics	3	35337
University of Bristol	26	Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism	2	25932
University of Durham	25	Education	3	46546
University of East London	04	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	2	41088
University of Exeter	27	Area Studies	2	43657
University of Hertfordshire	30	History	2	36030
University of Newcastle	29	English Language and Literature	4	48191
University of Oxford	22	Social Work and Social Policy	4	39041
			Mean	44048
			Min	12971
			Max	70946
			SD	12091

Table 3: Quality Rated (QR) funding allocated by HEFCE in 2016/17 per 3* impact case study, based on the case studies from Units of Assessment where 100% of the impact sub profile was graded at 3*

Institution	UOA	UOA name	Number of case studies	2016/17 QR allocation per case study (£)
Birmingham City University	36	Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library and Information Management	2	8414
De Montfort University	36	Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library and Information Management	1	16214
Edge Hill University	20	Law	2	9974
Leeds Beckett University	04	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	2	7538
Liverpool John Moores University	20	Law	2	4987
Middlesex University	04	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	2	8888
Oxford Brookes University	29	English Language and Literature	2	11034
Queen Mary University of London	08	Chemistry	2	18453
Roehampton University	30	History	2	11770
University of Bath	11	Computer Science and Informatics	3	18830
University of Keele	30	History	2	9533
University of Leeds	31	Classics	2	4504
University of Leicester	04	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	4	10805
University of Leicester	15	General Engineering	3	23537
University of Leicester	22	Social Work and Social Policy	2	8549
University of Liverpool	13	Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials	3	18830
University of Liverpool	20	Law	3	9499
University of Nottingham	16	Architecture, Built Environment and Planning	3	14819
University of Westminster	04	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	2	8795
University of Wolverhampton	30	History	2	9833
University of York	13	Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials	3	17496
University of Cambridge	32	Philosophy	8	3415
University of Lincoln	36	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management	2	4804
University of Plymouth	11	Computer Science and Informatics	1	29186
University of Worcester	29	English Language and Literature	2	5630
			Mean	11813
			Min	3415
			Max	29186
			SD	6384

What does this all mean for UK researchers? Whatever our motives for generating impact from research, our employers are partly motivated by the financial rewards now linked to impact, and indeed the associated league table positions based on "impact excellence". The extent to which this translates in any meaningful way into incentives for researchers depends on the way each institution chooses to use that funding. Most Universities top-slice their QR funding before it gets to faculties or schools; whether this then reaches or

benefits the researchers responsible for generating the impacts is another matter. In some cases, decisions about spending this money are being taken centrally without any input from faculties or schools, let alone the researchers involved in generating the impacts. In Kent, the policy is to allocate the QR funding to the schools that 'earned' it, based on their staff FTE submitted to the various UOAs. However there is a 'central charge' levied on school allocations in order to determine their budget, so a top slice - but based on activity rather than allocation.

Some of us are pleased that at last, impact is being valued highly enough to be rewarded in this way. However there are also concerns about the power of these financial incentives to create game-playing tactics that will bring the academy into disrepute. We share both these feelings. Arguably, it is only because of the financial and reputational rewards associated with the REF that impact is now so widely (although far from universally) integrated into workload models and promotion criteria across the sector. These incentives are clearly motivating many researchers to engage with impact who had never fully considered the effect of their research before. However, it is these very incentives that are leading some researchers to chase impact for purely career-based motives, which has the potential to result in negative unintended consequences. As the rewards become greater, we must become ever more vigilant to these behaviors, and do all we can to build research cultures that value impact intrinsically, whether or not the benefits can be submitted to REF or are likely to score highly.

Mark Reed holds the HEFCE N8 Chair of Socio-Technical Research at Newcastle University. He is a recognized international expert in impact research with >100 publications that have been cited over 8000 times. He has won awards for the impact of his work as a research Professor and Research Manager for an international charity.

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