



An international REF? Response to the HEFCE Survey
12 November 2014

1. What do you think the key benefits would be of expanding the REF internationally? Please select up to three from the list below

International benchmarking of research quality

- Increased UK research reputation
- Improved researcher collaboration
- Potential for increased investment in UK research
- Cost-savings to the HE sector
- Enhanced process of peer review
- Shaping the international agenda for research assessment
- None
- Other

2. What do you think the key challenges would be in expanding the REF internationally? Please select up to three from the list below

Potential for increased burden/cost

- Comparability of research environment internationally
- Comparability of disciplines internationally
- Practical issues (e.g. language barriers)**
- Potential for diminished reputation of REF
- Diversity in research systems and funding processes internationally**
- None
- Other

3. In view of the potential benefits and challenges overall, how supportive would you be of further work to explore the issues in more depth?

- Supportive
- Not supportive**
- Don't know
- Other

Supplementary response to the Survey

GuildHE's / CREST's initial reaction takes into account the potential ramifications for our Members' institutions and research-active staff. Internationalising the REF would in some ways make it more useful from a disciplinary perspective, and justify the notion of 'international excellence', and help, in principle, the UK to move away from 'doing its own thing' when it wants researchers to compete and collaborate at the international level. But without a sense of detail it is difficult to think how the already enormously time consuming process could, practically speaking, be rolled out on an international scale. Questions from Members include: who would participate? (One cannot, for instance, see the US signing on, or even European partners, at least in the near future.) How would it work in practice? Would it become even more expensive and complicated to run, making it more difficult for small and specialists to engage? Would the scale of the exercise demand greater reliance on research metrics, despite the sector's general scepticism about over-emphasising quantitative data to the detriment of contextual, qualitative assessments.¹ Furthermore, what about practical issues of language, and the complexities of practice-based research and / non-written dissemination?

More fundamentally, the REF is about esteem and reputation, but it is primarily a mechanism through which the government awards funding: how would this work in practice, given that there is no international mechanism for awarding funding along the lines of QR, so another concern is: would an international REF in any way threaten dual funding principles? How would an international REF engage, for example, with the ERA? Broadly speaking there is a danger that an international REF would evolve into a kind of international league table, and this could - potentially - make it more difficult to preserve the principle of 'islands of excellence'. It is difficult to comment at this point, because it is so speculative, but GuildHE / CREST are concerned about the potential for an international REF to become a highly complex exercise, expensive and time consuming, that preferences scale over excellence.

¹ See <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2014/news97809.html>