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By e-mail: REFreview@bis.gsi.gov.uk

Dear Hannah

LORD STERN'S REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

The Nuffield Foundation has looked with interest at the recent call for evidence to support Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). As an organisation which makes grants to support research in UK higher education institutions, and a collaborator with UK funding councils, we have a very strong interest in how research excellence is defined, measured and supported.

Before setting out how the Nuffield Foundation regards the questions in the consultation, it may be helpful to say a little about the organisation. The Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust established by William Morris, Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors. Our aim is to improve social well-being and we do this by:

- Funding research and innovation projects in education and social policy. In 2015 we funded 34 new projects with a total value of £5 million. Seventy-five per cent of these projects were based in universities.
- Building research capacity in science and social science, most notably through Q-Step, a £19.5m programme designed to promote a step-change in quantitative social science training for undergraduates (co-funded with the ESRC and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)), and Nuffield Research Placements, which provide over 1,000 Year 12 students each year with the opportunity to undertake STEM research projects (many based in universities).

It is clear, therefore, that on a day-to-day and strategic basis, our work is intrinsically linked to the UK higher education system and we have a strong interest in the mechanisms for ensuring the quality of the research base. Very specifically, my colleague Teresa Williams (Director of Social Research and Policy) was a member of the REF Main Panel C from January 2013.

From our point of view, some of the areas of questioning in the call overlapped with others, and in light of that we are responding to a sub-set rather than the entire suite. The remainder of this letter sets out views on these substantive areas.

How the Nuffield Foundation uses the REF

The recent higher education Green Paper and the Nurse Review made some good and practical suggestions about the future of research support in the UK. We particularly welcome the continued backing for the dual-support system and would also highlight (as a closely related feature of this) the importance of HEFCE's 'Charity Support Fund', which we hope will continue to feature in its support for quality-related research funding.

We fully support the concept of peer review as an essential mechanism for assessing the quality of research, although we appreciate it is not the only one. Rigorous review of research applications is an essential part of our research funding process, and we ensure that the process is carefully and transparently managed and mediated. Reviewers are carefully selected to ensure that potential projects get constructive challenge and formative input, in relation to the significance, rigour and feasibility of the proposed work, the strength of the team, and the potential for impact. Importantly, we routinely request reviews from senior representatives of policy and practice communities who often offer a very valuable perspective. We strongly support the use of peer review more widely, provided that it is based on careful selection of a range of peer reviewers who are motivated to improve the rigour and contribution of research to. It is our view that this approach is vital for securing excellence across the research landscape.

In this regard, the REF is very helpful to the Foundation in terms of providing evidence of the quality and impact of work in particular fields (but could, perhaps, do more to address cross-disciplinary work). The increased contribution of 'user' assessors in REF 2014, alongside a stronger impact agenda was in our view both necessary and effective. The Foundation has, for example, drawn upon REF 2014 outcomes when evaluating its Oliver Bird Rheumatism Programme (OBRP) and data from the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was used when we selected universities for this programme in 2004.

Looking at our grant-making activity over the past three years, the majority (56%) of our higher education support (in financial terms) has been directed at departments which have a 4* rating for either or both of impact and outputs. If we include 3* departments, this figure rises to 85%. Notably, we do fund researchers and departments which fall outside these higher ratings. The perpetual challenge to secure and support consistently high quality research and the desirability of developing promising, innovative and risky work is as much an element of our strategic funding approach as it is for the funding councils.

In addition, the research we have funded has been seen by institutions to contribute notably to their submissions for the REF, especially in relation to impact. The impact case studies from the 2014 REF revealed that 57 institutions cited work funded by the Nuffield Foundation in their submissions, across 21 units of assessment. We hope that a continued focus on impact (alongside outputs and research environment) will continue to encourage a strong pipeline of high quality applicants for our funding streams.

There is a strong connection between the assessment of 'quality' embodied in the REF and its predecessors, and our own assessment of quality in judging proposals that will contribute

rigorous evidence and objective thinking to the major questions facing society. That is, even where we do not make an explicit reference to the REF when judging the quality of proposals, individuals in highly rated institutions are well-supported to make applications for grants, or work in environments which are alert to grant opportunities to a greater degree than others. In short, institutional research infrastructure makes a difference to the potential for research income generation.

How the Nuffield Foundation views REF reform

We note the recent Green Paper's support for the increased use of metrics in evaluating research quality. We are aware, however, (and as the July 2015 'Metric Tide' report notes) that the humanities and social sciences (HSS), where most of our research funding is directed, are poorly represented (for example) by bibliometric data. Equally, there has been criticism of the way in which the most recent REF has managed the review of cross-disciplinary workⁱ. This is a concern of ours as we develop new research themes which do not map easily onto single units of assessment and the outcomes of which may not lend themselves to citation based metrics. Perhaps there ought to be more work to understand why this is the case before there is a stronger emphasis on this type of data when research quality is appraised.

The place of impact in the assessment of research quality has to be welcomed and should remain as a focal point of any future research assessment system. As a funder of research, it is something we are increasingly keen to understand. We are aware that this new feature of the REF has challenged many researchers and perhaps there is scope for greater collaboration between Research UK (RUK) (if and when it comes into being) and the wider funding community in terms of concepts and definitions with regard to impact. As highlighted in the previous section, we regard the involvement of policy makers and practitioners as essential to this process and think there is potential for greater involvement of some of the independent research institutes outside academia in assessing methodological rigour as well as impact.

The funding councils should be commended for the extent to which they have tried to learn from REF 2014. For example, the Grant (2015)ⁱⁱ review of impact for HEFCE suggested that the rich data contained in the current suite of impact reports should be streamlined to support analysis. Doing so may help to promote more collaborative charity-RUK funding if there was a greater degree of agreement on definitions and measures of impact and outcomes.

That said, our use of the REF outcomes to examine the impact of our funding of the OBRP was limited by the lack of access to data providing evidence of direct links between individual researchers and the contributions they had made to submissions. More generally, access to such data would be of great benefit to our decision-making around grant applications. This is a development – acknowledging the sensitivity there may be about such information – that we would be interested in exploring. Increasing the transparency over which researchers' work has and has not been submitted might be one way to incentivise preferred institutional behaviour (in other words, discourage 'gaming').

Clearly a significant 'industry' grew up around the REF 2014. Given that the stakes are high for this exercise it is not surprising that institutions work hard to position themselves well to benefit from the quality-related funding pool. There are parallels with the ways in which

schools have adopted this approach in relation to 'league tables'ⁱⁱⁱ and it is likely that whatever measurement system is adopted, institutions will respond in ways which are both predictable and hard to eliminate without creating further anomalies. As Simon Burgess and Rebecca Allen have noted in relation to school accountability: 'performance measures send signals on what is valued'^{iv}.

In this regard, we would like to say a little about the particular way in which 'outputs' are regarded. There is probably too much focus on outputs at the moment, and the emphasis on 'academic' products such as journal articles and books – even with improvements in Open Access – is creating some disincentives to do the right kind of work in some areas. Whether this is intended or not, it has caused academic colleagues to direct their energy concerning project outcomes towards 'REF-able' outputs. That is, journal articles are valued much more highly than outputs for users (whether practitioners or policy-makers). This can be compounded by a perception that journals do not value the sorts of outputs (and sometimes research – e.g. systematic reviews) that we want to fund. This distorts the research landscape so that the sort of projects we want to fund risk not being viewed as 'valuable' to researchers.

We are very aware – not least because of the huge time commitment made by Teresa Williams in her time on Main Panel C - of the need to demonstrate that resources required by the REF are proportionate. Our view is that the introduction of the impact agenda fully justified the intensive approach that was associated with REF 2014: the culture change needed to take this agenda seriously required the thorough and deliberative approach which brought together users and academics. There is, however, an argument for running fully comprehensive research excellence assessments (that simultaneously cover outputs, quality and impact) less frequently.

One approach could be to consider the REF 2014 outcomes as, to some degree, the yardstick, and for subsequent reviews to be lighter in touch and either focus on weaker areas (by unit of assessment) or areas which are seen in need of development for strategic reasons. As noted above, issues concerning cross-disciplinary work and HSS metrics are immediate concerns. More generally, the 'research environment' dimension could have done more to challenge and incentivise institutions to develop the research capabilities needed across academia. For example, it could better signal the need to equip early and mid-career researchers with excellent logical reasoning, understanding of the contribution of a range of research designs, and strong data skills. The lack of these skills is an issue which the Foundation (together with HEFCE and ESRC) is attempting to tackle in the social sciences (but which is not confined to those disciplines) through Q-Step. Although this programme is relatively large scale (with 15 Centres collectively receiving £19.5m funding over 5 years) the sustainability of Q-Step will be dependent on the wider incentive structure for universities to maintain the investment as a central plank in building research capacity and capability.

A second approach could see, again using 2014 as a fixed point, much more use of ongoing data provided by institutions (perhaps drawing on data from sources such as Researchfish). This could lead to a shift in behaviour away from 'gearing up' for a major periodic review to putting impact and output recording much more in the realm of 'business as usual'. Reviews would then become aggregates of ongoing performance, perhaps with an additional level of international peer review.

The best (or least bad) way forward is to establish criteria and processes which are visible, comprehensible and (as far as possible) agreed by all of the interested parties. To some degree this exists already, but ensuring that any future assessment exploits routine and regularly collected information as much as possible is very important. This should mean that as access to any government-supported research becomes increasingly competitive, and charitable bodies play a more notable funding role, that we work towards agreement across what is increasingly a *tri-support* system (QR: research councils: charitable bodies) for research. Sir Paul Nurse described the 'particular care [which should be] paid to ensuring there are strong interactions between the charitable research sector and the Research Councils' and the route towards a 'new' REF with better outcome measures and scope for analysis needs to involve views from this sector.

To summarise, we recognise that the REF is a major and valuable exercise in assessing research outcomes. The desire to streamline this cannot rely entirely on metrics (as they stand) and considerable attention needs to be given to the evaluative outputs of the REF 2014 when considering ways forward. Developments which draw on evidence which is regularly collated could offer a more flexible and less high stakes approach to quality assessment. The charitable funding sector needs to be closely involved in the development of new definitions of outcomes and impact and can play a role in their collection and measurement.

We hope you will find these views useful and would be very happy to provide more details on any of the issues discussed in this response.

Yours sincerely,



Josh Hillman

Acting Director

i http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Review.of.the.UKs.interdisciplinary.research/2015_interdisc.pdf

ii http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Analysis.of.REF.impact/Analysis_of_REF_impact.pdf

iii <https://fullfact.org/education/why-reforms-school-league-tables-have-caused-such-controversy/>

iv <https://cmpo.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/why-the-new-school-league-tables-are-much-better-but-could-be-better-still/>