**Annex A: Consultation questions**

**Section one: purposes of research assessment**

1. In addition to enabling the allocation of research funding and providing accountability for public investment in research, which purposes should a future UK research assessment exercise fulfil? Select all that apply.
2. Provide benchmarking information
3. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities
4. Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation
5. Create a performance incentive for HEIs.
6. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?

**Promote a culture of inclusivity and career trajectory:**  
The exercise should also provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies on how best to support and develop researchers at all career stages and create a culture of inclusivity. Whilst REF 2021 was more inclusive than previous exercises, the assessment itself (by its very nature)goes against the underpinning principles of achieving inclusivity and inevitably creates a culture of competitiveness.

Positively, the 2021 introduction of submission of all staff with SRR status has succeeded in broadening the research base and conditions of participation. Increasing the participation of staff at all stages of career has the potential to create a culture of inclusivity. Therefore, further methods for promoting inclusivity should be explored in more detail in the next exercise.

**Encouraging capacity building and collaboration:**  
Future exercises could provide forward planning of research capacity nationally as well as an evidence base for mapping international collaboration. Also, interdisciplinary research should be well established on the agenda of a future exercise.

1. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.

With regards to ‘*providing an evidence base for informing national priorities’*, this is somewhat already captured in Outcome Agreements (SFC).

An exercise that provides an evidence base for informing national priorities has the potential to exclude researchers outside the priority areas. There is also caution when addressing national priorities given the devolved nations having differing priorities and it would have to be clear how this would be addressed.   
  
Elements of the assessment exercise could be achieved through the introduction of routine, annual, research data returns. This could relieve some administrative burden on institutions, by allowing the process to be engrained in everyday practice, however, it is realised that this would not be like-for like with the current assessment. To maintain robustness and integrity, the submission of routine, quantitative data would benefit from a supporting, contextual narrative.

1. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

**Accountability**  
There is agreement that there should be accountability for public investment in research, however there should be more equity in the distribution of funding. There should be consideration of the impact of inequities in the sector, between different types of institution, amount of research time allocated to staff, facilities etc.

**All types of research**  
The overall approach should still remain open and inclusive, to invite and support a range of research activities and topics. It should also encourage best research practice from a breadth of established and early career researcher active staff.

**Avoidance of ranking**  
There is caution in regards to benchmarking information as part of the research assessment system. Competitive rankings of institutions is unhelpful and will always favour institutions that are already better funded and has the potential to create a negative and exclusive institutional culture.

Using research assessment as a performance incentive for HEIs has the potential to promote a negative research culture, e.g. where academics focus on volume rather than quality or on individual performance over mentorship of developing peers.

**Section two: setting priorities**

1. To what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 9 (least important)

Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate (C)

Impact of the system on research culture (e)

Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact.(A)

Robustness of assessment outcomes (i)

Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises) (b)

Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance (h)

Impact of the system on the UK research system’s international standing (f)

Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development (d)

Maintaining continuity with REF 2021 (g)

1. Relating to research culture, to what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)

Impact of the assessment system on research careers (a)

Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion (b)

Impact of the system on open research (e)

Impact of the system on research integrity (f)

Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations) (c)

Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research (d)

1. What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? Please set out the considerations and indicate where they should be located in the list of priorities.

**Evolutionary change**  
Whilst the future exercise should not be driven by maintaining continuity with REF 2021, it is suggested that some level of continuity is maintained rather than a complete overhaul. Evolutionary rather than radical changes to the exercise are preferred, striving for simplicity whilst retaining robustness, and adhering to the key principles of the exercise.

1. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

**Positive practices and supporting careers**  
A future UK research assessment system should support open research and reward collegiality and research career stability. Especially a system which encourages a trajectory and clear line of sight for potential early career REF staff rather than ever changing rules which cause instability and reactive processes within institutions to satisfy the new eligibility criteria. The assessment should be one that promotes fairness at all times and provide incentives to support less developed research areas.

To promote collegiality, it is suggested communication between HEIs is established so the UK becomes a place of REF support rather than competition with consideration of systems used in other countries.

**Section three: identifying research excellence**

1. Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?

(Multiple options: ‘Should be heavily weighted’ – ‘Should be moderately weighted’ – ‘Should be weighted less heavily’ – ‘Should not be assessed’ – ‘Don’t know’)

1. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers) Should be moderately weighted
2. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards) Should be moderately weighted’
3. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets) Should be heavily weighted’
4. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward) Should be heavily weighted’
5. Engagement beyond academia ‘Should be moderately weighted
6. Societal and economic impact Should be heavily weighted
7. Other (please specify). N/A
8. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?

The University’s research inputs (including income, investment, contributions and processes) should to be evaluated in terms of how they contribute to the final outcomes (output/impact/environment components).

Development of research capacity, culture and recognition of academic input needs to be weighted more heavily. Although academic impact (contributions/esteem) is captured, it is being diluted in current REF5 template, which doesn’t emphaise the importance of this activity.   
  
The exercise needs to ensure everything in the assessment can be checked and validated, this is especially important for the claims made in the Environment narrative.

1. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don’t know)
2. Originality No
3. Significance No
4. Rigour No
5. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?

The criteria for assessing outputs was not explicit enough. The assessment exercise should be clear and transparent and provide benchmark examples where appropriate. Therefore, clear guidance is needed with worked examples especially for the critical threshold between 2 and 3 star.

Clear and specific guidance for Outputs, particularly for Art and Design Unit of Assessment to limit the variations of institutional interpretation, should be given.

1. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don’t know)
2. Reach No
3. Significance No
4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact?

The increase in weighting for impact was well received and although criteria is clear, it may not necessarily be appropriate in all cases and types of impact. Definitions need to be refined as the criteria can be interpreted differently in different disciplines as well as within the same UoA.

1. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don’t know)
2. Vitality No
3. Sustainability No
4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?

Environment guidance is too diffuse and open to interpretation and needs more structure and standardization, e.g. more detailed templates and examples.

**Section four: assessment processes**

1. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:
2. stability
3. currency of information
4. both a. and b.
5. neither a. nor b.
6. Don’t know.
7. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information?

The frequency of the REF exercises has to balance the need for financial stability in the medium term and the currency of the REF results. Yearly results (based on current information) would mean there would be no need for transitional arrangements, as the funding would change as the quality of current research changes.

1. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?
2. Yes, split by main panel
3. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)
4. No
5. Don’t know.
6. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

It is too difficult to answer this question without more detailed options and models on how it might operate. It is thought it would be interesting to explore how a rolling basis would be conducted but there is caution on the practicalities and how this would work in real time.

As stated in question three, a degree of routine data submission could occur on an annual basis allowing the process to be engrained in everyday practice as it is with reporting learning and teaching data.

1. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?
2. Individual
3. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas
4. Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes
5. Institution
6. Combination of b. and d.
7. Combination of c. and d.
8. Other (please specify)
9. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise?

It would be interesting to explore a model which allows more flexibility in the alignment of staff, outputs and impacts to disciplinary areas/ UoAs. The current model somewhat ‘pigeon-holes’ researchers and their work. A move further towards de-coupling of staff, outputs and impacts could promote more flexibility and better reflect the nature of multidisciplinary research conducted at an institutional level rather than at a unit level.

1. To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)
2. Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment
3. Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:
   * 1. Outputs
     2. Impact
     3. Environment
4. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:
   * 1. Outputs
     2. Impact
     3. Environment
5. Should not be used at all.
6. Other (please specify)
7. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

A metrics based approach seems potentially problematic; if not used responsibly it also risks breaching DORA principles, which most HEIs are (at least officially) committed to. Concern is expressed about the reliance on metrics and how this might encourage poor behaviours. Clarity and continuity would be required on how the metrics are being used by institutions and reviewers responsibly.

There should be caution on the approach to use metrics as a replacement of peer assessment. For outputs, standardised metrics simply cannot provide meaningful information regarding the quality/rigour etc. As with current exercise, it might remain appropriate for some sub-panels to consider metrics in the peer review of outputs but metrics cannot provide an accurate picture on their own and not all disciplines have them.  
  
The Impact and Environment component could potentially benefit from standardized metrics which make the assessment more robust, transparent and comparable, if appropriately contextualised.

1. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?

It is felt that the burden on academics is too great and not sustainable. The current research assessment system is not just a bureaucratic burden on the institution but also a significant academic burden for academics/ researchers and panel members. An enormous amount of academic input goes into the assessment. There is a need to reduce the bureaucracy burden and relieve pressure on academics/researchers, which in turn would free up time for activities such as mentorship, co-authoring, impact generation and wider contributions to the UK research base.  
The consultation should explore opportunities to reduce the academic burden, while still maintaining the integrity of the exercise.

To alleviate this burden it is suggested that guidance on the principles is published early and do not change throughout the process.

The rules of REF2021 were overly complex and difficult to navigate. Guidance should be clear and transparent so institutions and academics know what they are working towards. It is suggested there is help for HEIs to establish an internal system necessary to support performance in the exercise. Institutions rely heavily on external input and there are probably many interpretations of how to interpret research to best fit the assessment. It should not become something that supports the need for external academic consultants in order to navigate it well.

Finally, allow institutions to select what they put in on the basis of it being a representative reflection of the research conducted rather than specifying quotas and min / max.