Impact case studies: Lessons learned from REF 2014

Processes
The process for delivering case studies must be improved to avoid the high level of case study revision (in one instance over 16 revisions on a single case) experienced in REF 2014. It is essential that those involved in the creation of impact case studies are familiar both with the impact being claimed and with HEFCE impact case study eligibility criteria and guidelines.

Proposed process: Unit of Assessment (UoA) provides the central REF Team with a brief summary of a potential case study, ideally from the Impact Repository. A member of the REF Team meets with the relevant researcher or research facilitator to discuss the case in detail, in relation to REF guidelines. By prior agreement at a School, UoA or individual case study level, the first draft of the case in the REF template may be written by the researcher, research facilitator or a REF Team member (although this is unlikely to be possible within 18 months of the submission date). During the subsequent development of the case study, it is essential that three-way contact is maintained between the researcher/research facilitator, the REF Office and the UoA Chair or Administrator - difficulties were experienced in the 2014 submission when only two of these parties were involved.

Anecdotal accounts suggest that strong case studies were overlooked for REF submission by some UoAs. It is therefore essential that a system for storing and reviewing impact case studies is employed. The University strongly advises departments and faculties to use the Impact Repository (https://docs.cam.ac.uk/impactcases) as and when impact occurs.

The University also recommends that exit interviews are conducted with researchers and impact information is captured before staff leave.

Research
For the purposes of REF, impact must be underpinned by excellent research. Cases must demonstrate that without the research, the impact would not have occurred or would have been significantly altered or reduced. Cases were marked down considerably, and even risked an unclassified rating, where the link between research and impact was not clear or where the research was not deemed to be of sufficient quality.

Post-REF discussions indicate that demonstrating an outward-facing, collaborative or interdisciplinary approach can be beneficial within an impact portfolio. In some UoAs it appears that ‘lone scholar’ research does not score as highly as collaborative research.

Certain types of research appear to produce impact which scores highly. Research which leads to health-related impacts appears to score well.

Research which in some way touches on issues of identity, community and accessibility appears to lend itself to the impact agenda.

Anecdotal accounts suggest that in some cases contracted research did not score highly.
Problem-oriented research appears to lead to strong impact cases.

**Maximising and capturing impact**

Wherever possible, impact should be built into research projects from conception. When it is intended that research benefit those beyond academia (which is a necessary condition for most REF case studies), impact should be shown to be integral to the research process rather than supplementary. This can be done through Pathways to Impact, which the University can provide support for (e.g. through School research facilitators, Department/Faculty knowledge transfer facilitators, impact officers etc.).

**Evidence**

Qualitative and quantitative evidence should be gathered routinely. The Impact Repository can be used to store potential cases and related evidence. Obtaining data retrospectively for REF 2014 was time-consuming and difficult. Company contacts had moved and data had been lost. It is therefore advisable to capture as much information as possible as and when impact occurs. Information which proves unnecessary can be ignored. Information which is not captured but is later required may be impossible to obtain.

If relevant information is stored in the Repository, UoAs will be less dependent on an individual researcher’s ability and willingness to participate at a later date, and on institutional memory.

Where possible, obtain details of economic impact. Whilst there may be legitimate reasons for not providing financial material, in some cases it seems that UoAs were simply uncomfortable about pursuing such information.

Until guidelines for the next exercise are published, see HEFCE’s 2014 ‘Panel Criteria and Working Methods’ ([http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2012-01/](http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2012-01/)) for examples of impact evidence types. Also see impact case studies from key competitors with high scoring impact submissions ([http://results.ref.ac.uk/](http://results.ref.ac.uk/)).

Alongside gathering evidence, UoAs should focus on generating evidence to support impact cases. Consider the use of surveys (Survey Monkey, Smart Survey etc.) and testimony. When creating surveys, ask questions pertinent to the impact agenda (see ‘Public engagement’ below). Aim to secure unreserved, compelling testimony from beneficiaries. Consider whether researchers are always best placed to obtain testimony, or whether another approach should be taken. For example, a researcher may wish to inform a beneficiary that an administrator will be in contact to request testimony, and the administrator could provide the beneficiary with helpful advice prior to testimony being drafted, or request amendments to strengthen or clarify testimony if necessary.

**Reach**

In some UoAs there appears to be a correlation between geographical reach and high impact scores. It may therefore be helpful to increase impact abroad if, as anecdotal evidence suggests, highly significant localised impact did not score as highly as less significant impact in multiple regions. For example, selling a single product in a new region could potentially move a case from 3* to 4*. However, some cases which referred more broadly to ‘worldwide’ impact scored highly, and so the issue of reach could be addressed by altering the approach to writing cases rather than to creating impact in more areas.
In the majority of UoAs, cases which scored highly did not demonstrate that impact was international, but rather that the intended beneficiaries had been reached (see ‘Writing case studies’ below).

**Public engagement**

Public engagement impacts were amongst the hardest to capture and evidence.

When first envisaging public engagement activities, consider which specific strands or outputs of research can be referenced. Requesting testimony which confirms the link could be useful.

Researchers should consider what impact they wish to achieve at the earliest stage when planning public engagement activities. For the purposes of REF, dissemination is not sufficient. It is necessary to gather evidence of critical debate (reader comments, reviews, discussions in the media and statements from opinion leaders).

A clear idea of anticipated impact can be helpful when gathering feedback. For example, a researcher working on an exhibition may wish to increase young people’s engagement with a gallery. A survey question on enjoyment will not show whether this objective has been met; a specific question about anticipated future attendance is needed. When initiating public engagement activities, consider the types of intended audiences.


**Writing case studies**

Simple, linear narratives scored highly: problem identified, research conducted, problem alleviated.

When writing a case study, particularly one involving public engagement, it is helpful to ask the question ‘to what effect?’ Answering this question should help ensure that transformative impact is demonstrated.

Define the beneficiaries and provide context: societal challenge, opportunity, market size, beneficiary and benefit.

Use clear presentation, subheadings, sensible spacing, pictures and diagrams. Cases were marked down for poor presentation. However, anecdotal accounts suggest that the use of external writers did not improve scores as a corporate feel led to scepticism.

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

Case studies should include many examples of corroborating evidence, and the key facts and figures should be easily identifiable.

It may be helpful to use HEFCE terminology, particularly that relating to assessment criteria (for REF 2014 these were ‘reach’ and ‘significance’).

Where a case study includes multiple impact claims, careful consideration should be given to omitting any weakly evidenced claims.

In the vast majority of UoAs, reach appears to have been scored in terms of potential versus achieved reach. Anecdotal accounts suggest that when writing a case study ‘you are writing

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your own exam paper’. It is therefore crucial that attention is given to objectives as well as outcomes. For example, a significant impact on a single region or institution may score highly if the case defines the project aims as local and specific. A case which either fails to define the aims or sets broader objectives may receive a lower score because full reach has not been achieved.

Many 4* impact cases were considerably over the indicative word limits. However, it does appear that verbose, dense cases were marked down. Contextual information should be sacrificed if it does not support (and certainly if it hinders) a compelling argument linking eligible research to demonstrable impact.

The issue of ‘gold plating’ – amending cases repeatedly - is relevant across UoAs and was raised in Rand’s ‘Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation’. Consideration should therefore be given to the amount of time taken to ensure cases comply with indicative guidelines, such as word counts, against the benefit of such compliance. During REF 2014 the number of case study iterations was high.

**Case study template**

_N.B. The following guidance is based specifically on the REF 2014 impact case study template_

**Summary**
Include key facts and figures and clearly identify the impact(s) claimed.

**Research**
Ensure that eligibility criteria have been (shown to be) met. Was the research conducted in the research period? Was the researcher employed by Cambridge at the time?

Do not focus solely on the research lead if the research was conducted by a team or was collaborative with other teams/organisations.

Where research was collaborative, describe the unique contribution of the Cambridge UoA.

Describe more than publications and goals. Clarify the nature of the research. Describe the methodologies and the key findings in an accessible way.

**Underpinning research**
Again, ensure the research was published within the relevant period.

**Impact**
Dividing the section by beneficiary or impact type can be a useful device to ensure the focus is on beneficiaries and final impacts.

Explain how the beneficiaries were engaged.

Clarify the contribution and proportionality of the research to the impact.

Provide contextual information – societal challenge, opportunity, market size, beneficiary and benefit. For example, if the impact is a new drug, how many people could use it?

Do not overstate or exaggerate. The Sub-Panel may be familiar with the impact and may be reviewing related case studies from other HEIs.

Include evidence within the text (e.g. quote testimony).
Include quantitative and qualitative evidence wherever appropriate.

Identify benchmarks along the route to impact and identify the target at which the impact is directed. Ensure final impacts are identified. Do not focus solely on intermediate impacts, even if they are easier to evidence. For example, research which impacts on a practitioner will go on to impact upon the practitioner’s client.

However, intermediate impacts can receive a 4* rating where they are significant. For example, a medical research discovery which led to dramatic funding shifts or increased employment can be outstanding, even though the final health impacts have yet to be achieved.

As mentioned under Research, cases which relate to identity, community and accessibility appear to score highly. Where these issues are not integral to the research itself, consider their development through impact activities (e.g. outreach with disengaged young people). Similarly, cases which demonstrate the human or social impact/benefit of research appear to score highly. For example, a policy case which refers to the number of people benefitting from a policy change may score more highly than a case which focuses solely on the policy change itself, or higher level impacts such as national economic gains.

**Further resources**

**Research Strategy Office website**
Further advice and guidance on impact is available on the Research Strategy Office website. The website includes a report on impact recommendations, a guide to gathering and generating evidence of the impact of public engagement, and a guide to planning public engagement activities: [http://www.research-strategy.admin.cam.ac.uk/impact](http://www.research-strategy.admin.cam.ac.uk/impact)


**Other Cambridge resources:**

School of Biological Sciences Impact Pages: [http://www.bio.cam.ac.uk/research/impact](http://www.bio.cam.ac.uk/research/impact)

CambPlants Hub Resources: [http://www.cambplants.group.cam.ac.uk/resources](http://www.cambplants.group.cam.ac.uk/resources)

**External resources:**
The REF website, including most REF case studies: [http://www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement: [http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/](http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/)

To suggest a resource to add to this list, please email Stephanie Swain, srf32@cam.ac.uk