

14 March 2019

Submission to the Research England Knowledge Exchange Framework consultation

Key points

- **The Government's commitment for UK R&D spend to reach 2.4 per cent of GDP by 2027 requires a vibrant domestic environment that attracts overseas investment. Public support is vital. To inform and earn public support for action to deliver this, the Royal Society recognises the need to better understand the range of benefits that research and innovation (R&I) brings to the UK, the distribution of those benefits across the country and its population, how those benefits are achieved and how best to measure them.**
- **There needs to be a clear and compelling statement about the purpose, approach and desired outcomes from a KEF that includes how it would complement, rather than duplicate existing frameworks, particularly the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This should reflect that the KEF is a light-touch exercise informed by existing metrics while the REF is a large-scale, in-depth, assessment exercise that informs institutions' funding allocations.**

Introduction

1. The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to Research England's consultation on the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). The Society is the National Academy of Science for the UK and the Commonwealth. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists working across a broad range of disciplines in academia and industry. The Society draws on the expertise of its Fellows and Foreign Members to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to UK, European and international decision makers.
2. The Royal Society is a research funder. Many of its funding programmes, such as the University Research Fellowship (URF) scheme, support researchers who will undertake knowledge exchange activities in the course of their work. The Society also provides direct support for knowledge exchange activities. This includes our Industry Fellowships scheme for academic scientists who want to work on a collaborative project with industry and for scientists in industry who want to work on a collaborative project with an academic organisation, and our Entrepreneurs in Residence scheme which supports UK universities in translating their world-leading research into new businesses and commercial products.
3. Achieving the government's ambitious commitment to invest 2.4 per cent of GDP into UK R&D by 2027 will require the creation of a vibrant environment that fosters research and innovation throughout UK public services, universities and businesses and attracts global investment, incentivising companies to locate their R&D here. To inform and earn public support for action to deliver this, the Royal Society recognises the need to better understand the range of benefits that research and innovation (R&I) brings to the UK, the distribution of those benefits across the country and its population, how those benefits are achieved and how best to measure them.
4. The Royal Society has therefore followed the development of the KEF with interest. In August 2018, our President, Sir Venki Ramakrishnan, sent a letter to then Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, Sam Gyimah MP setting out our views on knowledge exchange and necessary considerations for any further framework. This included an acknowledgement that, 'in the current climate it is essential to demonstrate accountability and value for money.'
5. In the Minister's response, he acknowledged and agreed with many of our concerns and noted that the, 'process of developing the KEF will be undertaken in full consultation with the sector and other relevant stakeholders.' We note the recent restatement of the importance of KEF and the need to develop a "new narrative around R&D that demonstrates that the value that this brings is not just a financial one in terms of increased private investment, but a social one in what it might

mean for the future health of the nation”¹ by the new Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, Chris Skidmore MP.

6. Following review of the January 2019 Knowledge Exchange Framework Consultation documents, we are reassured that Research England have engaged with the concerns set out by the Royal Society and others. In brief, we welcome the breadth of the activity captured by the seven ‘perspectives’, the practical non-hierarchical approach to recognising institutional diversity, and the recognition that metrics will not be able to capture all the valuable elements of knowledge exchange. Further detail on the Society’s positions is contained in the subsequent sections of this consultation response.

Purpose, aims and overall approach

7. The Society’s view is that there needs to be a clear and compelling statement about the purpose, approach and desired outcomes from a KEF that includes setting out how it would complement, rather than duplicate existing evaluation frameworks. The consultation documents set out three purposes for the KEF: ‘to provide universities with new tools to understand, benchmark and improve their purpose’; ‘to provide businesses and other users with more information on universities’; and ‘to provide greater public visibility and accountability.’ These are clear and suggest the distinctive purpose of the KEF. However, there remains confusion regarding the relative functions of the REF and the KEF and so an explicit statement of their different functions is required.
8. In terms of approach, the annual, largely metrics-driven approach set out in the consultation documents is welcome. The Society believes that the KEF should be a light-touch, low burden exercise that exists primarily to help external stakeholders understand the range of institutions’ knowledge exchange activity through the use of existing data. It is not, nor should it be, in itself, a new assessment exercise and so should not replicate elements of the REF. The REF Impact measure is designed to allow for the considered assessment of the, ‘effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.’ This will include assessment of institutions knowledge exchange activities. The KEF does not and should not seek to duplicate this. The distinction between the KEF and the REF is implicit. An explicit statement of the difference in form and function between the two frameworks, in line with the understanding set out above, is required.

Clustering

9. The UK’s higher education landscape is varied and approaches to knowledge exchange, together with the nature of the outcomes being sought, vary significantly between academic disciplines and their associated sectors. In practice, each institution’s knowledge exchange strategy reflects the research volume and focus of their academic base and the nature of their stakeholders and partners. The KEF consultation documents reflect this variance in their clustering approach. The Society welcomes this approach as a means to try and ensure fair comparison.

Perspectives and metrics

10. Knowledge exchange encompasses a highly diverse range of activities. It is integral to higher education institutions and, while commercialisation is an important part, it is not the only means to deliver impact from research. Other important forms such as community and public engagement, the provision of policy advice, and increasing the mobility of researchers between sectors, can be more difficult to capture quantitatively. The Society welcomes the explicit

¹ Commons Science and Technology Committee (30 January 2019) Oral evidence: Work of the Science Minister and Government Chief Scientific Adviser, HC 1826
<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/science-and-technology-committee/work-of-the-science-minister-and-government-chief-scientific-adviser/oral/96018.html>

recognition in the KEF consultation documents that 'knowledge exchange covers an extremely diverse range of activity' reflected in practice in the diversity of the seven 'perspectives'.

11. With regard to the metrics proposed, the use of extant HE-BCI data sources is consistent with the stated desire for 'a low burden exercise.' It may be beneficial for Research England to provide the sector with an opportunity to comment when the data provider for the metric 'co-authorship with non-academic partners as a proportion of total outputs' is determined.

Supplementary narrative

12. As set out above, the Society's view is that 'metrics will not be able to capture all the valuable elements of knowledge exchange.' Consequently, we welcome the scope for inclusion of non-assessed narrative content described in the KEF consultation documents. Presently, the use of additional narrative text is proposed for only two of the seven perspectives, 'Local Growth & Regeneration' and 'Public and Community Engagement', as they 'don't have fully developed metrics.' For both of these perspectives, the guidance on the provision of narrative text is clear.

Visualisation

13. The suggested method for visualising the results of the KEF appears to be sensible and consistent with the stated approach.

Implementation

14. The proposed method of implementation is reasonable. The Society notes that the pilot phase includes a representative breadth of institutions.

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