

Call for Evidence - BU Response

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Call: The technical advisory group call for evidence on the [Knowledge Exchange Framework](#) metrics.

Relevant other KEF sources: [Minster's letter](#); HEFCE [news](#).

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Question 1: What approaches and data need to be used to ensure a fair and meaningful comparison between different universities, taking into account factors that might impact individual institution's knowledge exchange performance (such as research income, size or local economic conditions), whilst allowing identification of relative performance? How should benchmarking be used?

Before considering how to measure knowledge exchange, it is important to define what it is and what it is for.

The HEFCE press release about the KEF says:

"The KEF metrics system will provide more information for the public and businesses on the performance of universities in knowledge exchange – how they share knowledge, expertise and other assets for the benefit of the economy and society. The aim is to provide regularly updated data that enables fair comparison between institutions' performance in knowledge exchange. This will help to support further improvements in universities and promote accountability, responsiveness to economic and societal needs and effective use of public funds."

We note that the [HEFCE KE portal](#) includes a number of categories:

- leadership, strategy and policy
- commercialisation and technology transfer
- other research exploitation
- exploiting the university's physical assets
- entrepreneurship and enterprise education
- skills and human capital development
- supporting the community and public engagement
- communities of practice

We welcome the objective of the KEF in seeking to assess how universities share knowledge, expertise and other assets for the benefit of the economy and society. However, in order to do so effectively, the framework must not limit itself to measuring only those things currently measured by the HEFCE knowledge exchange performance indicators – which rely on HE-BCI and HESA. Sharing knowledge includes much more than those indicators reflect – being limited to income, assets and staff. These relate only to three of the matters described in the bullets above, i.e. commercialisation and exploitation of research and physical assets. Given the focus in the Industrial Strategy on skills, partnership, place and community, we are surprised that this consultation does not seek to address these broader areas.

The risk of taking such a limited approach to the KEF and then linking investment in knowledge exchange to existing performance in knowledge exchange (as narrowly defined), is that there will be limited opportunities for institutions to build their activities in this area. Rather than recognising excellence wherever it is found – like the REF – or setting a level playing field for institutions through benchmarking and qualitative assessment on a range of indicators – like the TEF – the KEF will create a closed shop.

It is also essential that knowledge sharing for the KEF is assessed at a discipline level. Data produced at an institutional level will not be comparable and will be of limited value to local bodies, businesses or society more generally:

- Such stakeholders will often be more interested in information about a discipline not the average institutional picture because their engagement will be in the context of a particular discipline – e.g. a business seeking to engage in a project connected with the digital economy will not be interested in institutional figures that are distorted by a large amount of pharmaceutical patent income.

- In the REF, a small or specialised university is able to excel in a narrower range of Units of Assessment than a bigger generalist institution, and the value of the work done by the small institution will still be apparent. This will be lost if the assessment is only done at an institutional level.
- For the data and the assessment to provide a meaningful and fair comparison in terms of performance it must be at a discipline level.

We therefore propose that a different approach should be taken. Rather than simply refining the HE-BCI, we suggest a radical review of this proposal. We propose a KEF that is broad ranging and which addresses the full range of categories set out above. This would add value to the economy and the sector, and provide information that is of much more value to our regions, local communities, businesses and applicants.

Of course, some of these things may be harder to measure through a solely metrics-based approach. Like the REF, and the TEF, we do not believe that relying solely on a limited range of metrics is a good way to measure something as important as knowledge exchange within the economy. We therefore propose that the KEF should be modelled on a hybrid of the REF and the TEF with a core of metrics (much broader than the current set) and written submissions including case studies.

Structure of the assessment

We believe that the approach should be informed by established good practice in other types of institutional return. For example, drawing on the REF, there would be value in assessing, in addition to those metrics already covered by HE-BCI:

- the KE environment (i.e. the vitality and sustainability of activities and strategic focus)
- impact of knowledge exchange activities (as distinct from research impact) (i.e. case studies demonstrating excellent KE activities and achievements)
- metrics split by discipline and benchmarked

Public engagement should play an important role in the KEF. Our experience is that it plays a crucial part of the knowledge exchange and research lifecycle by furthering understanding as to the capability and value of universities, in addition to brokering relationships (see the NCCPE's [report](#) on the role of public engagement in the REF). There are other drivers to increase public engagement activity (e.g. from the Research Councils). We believe that aspects such as this would need to be assessed via case studies and qualitative submissions.

Using appropriate benchmarking as described below, the quantitative metrics described could be drawn through into a sliding scale with review of qualitative sources informing an overall ranking. Feedback from an expert panel would enable greater sharing of good practice across the sector enabling universities to emulate success. A greater understanding of what works well in terms of KE would be a welcome outcome from the KEF. As noted above, this would need to be done at a discipline level in order for the data to be useful.

Benchmarking

Metrics should be benchmarked as far as possible and adjusted to reflect differences of local economy and context against the following:

- **Local/regional economic and other conditions.** For example, some universities are able to access far more regeneration funding, augmenting their KE income figures in comparison to others who are unable to access such funds. In more rural areas, KE may be focused around SMEs, with limited budgets for collaboration with universities. However, a £2k investment by an SME in KE may translate into far greater growth proportionally than a £100k investment from a multi-national.
- **Discipline specialisations (opportunity for collaboration).** It will be important to consider how KE with particular types of sectors differs and adjust accordingly. For example, universities with considerable collaboration with the creative industry may report lower levels of KE activity in comparison to manufacturing industry, owing to the different types of costs incurred in undertaking such activity. Otherwise, there is a risk of missed opportunities with KE funding driven towards areas where there is the most existing growth rather than the most potential for growth.

- Staff and student numbers – **scale**. It is imperative to understand the scale of KE activities alongside other indicators of institutional capacity. Research income is an important measure and is a crucial coefficient to account for in any comparison, but not the only indicator given that KE performance extends beyond research.
- **Strategic KE priorities** (identified in, for example, Part A of the HE-BCI return) - for example, universities who are prioritising commercialisation (say over public engagement) could be compared/benchmarked against similar institutions.
- Investment received (**scale in relation to resource**). Universities receive vastly different levels of income from government to develop KE activities and as a result benchmarking should factor this in.
- Maturity of university's KE strategy (**length of KE relationships**). It is important to consider the length of time an institution has been developing KE activities. Institutions with a rich legacy of strategic focus and investment are likely to have stronger outcomes given the length of time it can take for KE initiatives to mature. For others, who perhaps have only started receiving HEIF income in more recent years, partnerships which lead to KE success will be less mature. Benchmarking needs to reflect this.

Metrics

In terms of additional metrics, we propose the following to support the approach that should be taken. As we have described above, these would need to be reviewed at discipline level:

- Course accreditations by PSRBs and other industry bodies - % of programmes accredited, % of students on accredited courses, % of students achieving professional qualifications on graduation. These outcomes demonstrate engagement with industry, a commitment to the development of skills and human capital supporting employability and the economy.
- % of students undertaking placements in industry. Placements are another important means of knowledge exchange.
- % of graduates employed in the region after graduation – benchmarked and adjusted to reflect the regional economy and employment opportunities. This metric demonstrates support for the community and engagement with local requirements.
- Continuing professional education provision. If so, it might be possible to use income as a proxy – this would not be appropriate if it were measured across disciplines (as income is restricted in the case of public sector provision, which is nevertheless of great value to the national economy and the development of skills and human capital).
- Academic staff having active engagement in industry or practice – this will demonstrate that education and research activities at an institution are informed by current thinking in the relevant sector - vital to employability of graduates, and also an indicator that research will be relevant to current practice.
- Student engagement in enterprise and entrepreneurship through the HEAR, and also by considering Graduate Outcomes data on a longitudinal basis. University spin-outs are one way to measure entrepreneurship, but the impact of our graduates over a much longer period after they leave university is overlooked by such a simplistic measure.

Question 2: Other than HE-BCI survey data, what other existing sources of data could be used to inform a framework, and how should it be used?

Additional data on KE is routinely collected by institutions for external reporting requirements, but it is rarely, if ever, aggregated. It is worth considering the data collected routinely as part of impact acceleration accounts (IAAs), as part of post-award processes (e.g. research fish), the HEIF annual monitoring statement and collaborative doctoral studentships. It is worth noting that there are attempts across the sector to develop consistent protocols in this type of reporting, see for example the CASRAI impact working group.

Question 3: What new (or not currently collected) data might be useful to such a framework?

See our comments on metrics and qualitative submissions above.

Any further data and evidence collected for the purpose of understanding KE activity should align to the guidance provided for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in order to maximise clarity and reduce the burden of reporting both internally and for external collaborators. In particular, we would welcome alignment with the data which will be required for the REF environment template further to the work being undertaken by the Forum for Responsible Metrics.

Reporting from key stakeholders as to the contribution universities make through KE may also be prudent, including accounts from LEPs, local authorities and industrial partners. The inclusion of 'KE users' (similar to researcher users on REF panels) could provide helpful insight as to the value of KE activities which may be impossible to qualify by other types of indicators. Given that KE value is challenging to measure and compare, there could be scope to explore how other sectors have utilised innovative tools to demonstrate metrics in a meaningful way. For example, tools used by the third sector, as detailed by the New Economics Foundation.

Question 4: How should KEF metrics be visualised to ensure they are simple, transparent and useful to a non-specialist audience?

This will be dependent on the data produced; however tables demonstrating how universities are contributing to particular industrial sectors would be helpful for identifying hotspots of activity and the development of clusters. Tables weighted appropriately could be useful for bringing insight as to where universities are focussing e.g. creation of new intellectual property, public engagement, engagement with industry and practice. Data displayed in maps will also be helpful to ensure regional variation is understood and to demonstrate the catalytic impact of KE in particular localities. These will all be much more useful at the discipline level.

It is also important to ensure that the KEF enables a clear demonstration of how the sector as a whole adds value to our society and economy through KE. Aggregate figures as to direct and in-kind support, and exemplars of excellence in KE, would not only provide a clear rationale for on-going funding but also inspire greater university-industry collaboration.

Question 5: Any other comments?

We believe that the KEF, if broadened and expanded as we have described, could be a valuable tool to support the Industrial Strategy, to support engagement with local communities and regions. By providing reporting at a discipline level, based on qualitative and quantitative data, benchmarked and set in context by case studies and other environmental data, it will provide useful information for those seeking to assess value for money for investment in these areas, and provide employers and national and local government with important information about the contribution made by institutions.

A limited KEF which looks at an institutional level at income and investment, will add nothing to the current data which is already available. In our view, this would be a lost opportunity, and would increase bureaucracy for no added benefit.

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