Summary of KEF call for evidence responses

12 November 2018

RE-P-2018-07

Background and context

1. Following announcement of the Knowledge Exchange Framework metrics exercise (http://re.ukri.org/documents/2017/jo-johnson-to-david-sweeney/) HEFCE launched a call for evidence, focussed specifically on how to ensure fair comparison, suitable data, and visualisation of the results. The paper presents an overview of the key points emerging. 106 responses were received from a wide range of sources, including:

   - many universities throughout the UK;
   - mission and membership groups, Representative bodies and learned societies;
   - other entities including a business, a LEP and several Catapult centres.

Method

2. The responses were summarised in a table to allow an overview of suggestions for fair comparison, new and existing sources of data, and visualisation to be made. Submissions were also coded by type, sentiment (strongly positive, cautiously positive, slightly negative, very negative) and approach to non-metric (e.g. narrative) elements. The responses were then coded by a team of five people, with several of the submissions assigned to them being coded by another person also, then manually checked for consistency.

3. We also coded for which type of organisation made the responses, and in what capacity the responder was answering (e.g. as representative of that organisation, individual academic etc.).

Overall sentiment

4. All coders recorded their impression of the overall sentiment expressed by the responses in broad categories of 'strongly positive' to 'strongly negative'. The majority of responses expressed a cautiously positive tone, essentially *'this could be useful if done well'*.

5. The most negative sentiments were because responders believed benchmarking was unhelpful, there was already sufficient existing data, or that their perception was that our definition of KE was too narrow.

6. Most of the less positive (but not overtly negative) sentiment was around expressing concerns of unclear purpose, taking a narrow definition of KE (to the detriment of e.g. the arts or social sciences, who may engage in different ways), that the institutional level was not appropriate, or that reliance on metrics alone would be unhelpful.

7. Other negative sentiment was connected to criticisms of the HEIF allocation method, which is out of scope for this exercise.

8. The most common positive sentiment was around the potential of the KEF to raise the profile of the value of KE within institutions, to support the case for funding, and to demonstrate the large volume of good work going on in this area.

Approach to inclusion of narrative/contextual information

9. There was almost universal support for supplementation of metrics by additional narrative or contextual information. This ranged from Research England providing some narrative on the wider KE landscape and economic conditions, to the inclusion of peer-reviewed narrative statements or case studies at a 'Unit of Assessment' (not institutional) level. Although the most common response was for institutions to be able to provide detailed contextual information such as that found in their institutional KE strategies.

10. All mission groups expressed support for narrative to varying degrees. Small and specialist institutions were more likely to call for a more comprehensive narrative element to address perceived shortcomings in metrics for the type of KE they were more likely to undertake.

11. The most commonly expressed view from Universities of all types was for the institution to be able to supplement metrics with detailed contextual information relating the metrics to their strengths, strategy, and local context.

Question 1: Approaches to fair comparison

12. There was broad recognition and support for the need to take into account the individual characteristics of the institution. Commonly mentioned variables were size (staff, students and income), disciplinary focus/specialism, location and local economic conditions, and nature of businesses in the locality.

13. Many respondents suggested some type of normalisation, most commonly to normalise for size in terms of staff and student FTE or research income. Some responses suggested clustering, or creating peer groups of institutions for benchmarking purposes.

14. Some responses supported creating self-defined peer groups, or allowing the institution to weight its own metrics in relation to their own strengths, or choosing their own metrics. Only two responses mention the inclusion of international comparisons.

15. Several responses comments on the need to measure the outcomes/impacts, not the 'inputs', and questioned income as a proxy for impact. Several also mentioned the need to take into account whether an institution received HEIF funding, as this could give them an advantage.

Question 2: Existing data

16. The HE-BCI survey was the most commonly cited source of existing data, although some noted that some aspects needed improved, or would be better sourced from other datasets (e.g. third party data for investment in spinouts, not HE-BCI estimates). It was frequently noted that HE-BCI provided less comprehensive measures on non-monetised transactions and interactions, particularly around community and public engagement, and where partnerships with businesses didn't result in income to the institution (e.g. through co-location of facilities, or student placements etc.)

17. Other HESA data, including the staff and finance records, and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey were mentioned, as were Innovate UK grant data, data from ResearchFish and Research Council grants, and BEIS science and innovation audits.

18. ERDF data on companies engaged with (as well as the approach ERDF projects take to evaluation/recording) was also mentioned by several responses, as well as other specific datasets or approaches (such as those developed for Research Council Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs).

19. Multiple responses highlighted student activity (placements, internships, employer sponsoring of courses etc.) as important. Others suggested citation information, most commonly patent citations and co-authorship with industry. Multiple other datasets were mentioned (included data from the ONS, Treasury reports on e.g. regional spending), although far less frequently.

Question 3: New data

20. There were many suggestions for the types of data that *could* be gathered (e.g. "success of clusters, networks and ecosystems…") to address shortcomings of existing datasets, but fewer suggestions of *how* to gather them in a realtively low-burden way. This was particularly true of responses suggesting that the ultimate outcomes/impacts from KE be measured.

21. There were multiple suggestions to attempt to measure impacts through increased employment, GVA, company turnover, or effect on the public (e.g. health). Another common suggestion was to broaden or revise HE-BCI to include more detail on partnerships not resulting in income, public and community engagement and contribution to other cultural activities.

22. There were several mentions of the value of staff movement (e.g. between industry and academia, and between Universities and Catapults) and of industry co-supervision of students.

23. There were several suggestions of measuring the representation of external views on university councils, and of university participation in local decision making bodies such as LEPs and local authorities as a measure of engagement.

24. Other notable (but not widespread) suggestions for metrics included the incorporation of the business view/satisfaction and levels of repeat business. However, suggestions to directly measure the satisfaction of recipients of knowledge exchange activities were not commonly expressed, which was to be expected considering the profile of the responders.

Question 4: Presentation/visualisation

25. There were generally fewer specific suggestions for this question with around 30% not expressing a view. The most commonly expressed sentiments were for a user-friendly interface or 'dashboard' tailored to the purpose of the KEF.

26. Another common suggestion was for users of the data to be able to filter or focus on data of most interest to them. Other suggestions included a dashboard within

HESA's HEIDI+ data tool, spider diagrams, Altmetric style 'donuts' and maps showing geographical impact.

27. Several responses urged that data was not over-simplified, and that institutions should have access to complete data for their own purposes. Others suggested a league table or ability to 'rank' institutions would be unhelpful.

28. Whilst we did not specifically ask about ratings systems, there was only one responses in support of TEF-style Gold, Silver, Bronze ratings, with others suggesting that this would over-simplify what is a complex area.

Other observations and conclusions

29. Another frequent question raised by respondents was about the purpose and intended audience for the KEF. This may be partly due to the call for evidence being conducted early in the development of the framework. We have since made efforts to clarify the dual purpose of providing useful information to universities as well as recipients of the knowledge, particularly businesses. This is also true of several comments made around differentiation from the existing REF and TEF exercises.

30. Overall, the call for evidence has helped to:

    a. Gauge the overall sentiment of the sector to the exercise.
    b. Provide evidence of the strength of feeling that this should not be a purely metrics-driven exercise.
    c. Gather views on the suitability of HE-BCI data to form a core part of the framework.
    d. Gather specific suggestions for data to form metrics, both new and existing, as well as approaches to visualise the results, which are still being worked through.

31. As expected given the focus and audience, this call for evidence did not well address how to incorporate the views of businesses and other recipients of knowledge. This is therefore being addressed separately by the work led by Professor Graeme Reid and the National Centre for Universities and Business.