Increase in research excellence in Social Science not recognized in the allocation of funding

A core purpose of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is to provide evidence on where there is excellence in research in the UK higher education system. This evidence provides the basis for allocating research (QR) funding and thus ensures that funding is focused on excellence.[1] [2]

For practical purposes, the assessment of excellence in the REF is done at the discipline level. In 2021, there were 34 Sub-Panels, organised into four Main Panels (A: Medical Science; B: Physical Science and Engineering; C: Social Sciences; D: Humanities). However, a core principle of REF is cross-discipline comparability in excellence: 4* research (world-leading) in one Sub-Panel is comparable to 4* research in another.

The allocation of research funding after the 2014 REF adhered to this principle. Funding was allocated according to the share of total quality, defined as (weighted) 4* and 3* research, in each Sub-Panel and in the Main Panels. Allowance was made for the higher cost of doing science research through additional cost weightings.

The allocation of research funding that followed the 2021 REF did not follow this principle. The shares of total funding for the Main Panels were fixed at 2014 REF levels. The 2021 REF results only informed the allocation of funding across Sub-Panels within the Main Panels. The practical consequence of this was to downgrade excellence in Main Panel C, which experienced the greatest growth in quality.

The table below illustrates this. The first column shows the share of research funding allocated to each of the Main Panels following the 2021 REF assessment. This allocation reflects the shares of total quality in the 2014 REF. The next two columns show the increase in the total number of (full-time equivalent) staff submitted to each of the Main Panels and the increase in the total volume of quality. Growth in staff and quality were highest for Main Panel C. The growth in FTE reflects expansion in subjects, as well as the new requirement to submit all researchers. The final column shows the counterfactual funding share – i.e. what the breakdown of total funding would have been if it were allocated on the basis of the unrestricted 2021 REF results. Compared to the actual funding share, Social Science lost £100m. It was awarded £258.1 million; it would have been awarded £361.8 million if the allocation of funding following REF2021 was on the basis that funding followed quality, as in 2014.

---

[1] From the Stern Review "Focussing QR funding on excellence should, in large measure, be based on strong evidence of excellence in past performance. That means examining carefully what use universities and research institutions have made of their resources in terms of the assessed excellence of their research."

[2] This analysis focuses on the funding allocation by Research England, and does not include funding outcomes in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Main Panel	Actual funding share	Increase in FTE between 2014 and 2021	Increase in total quality between 2014 and 2021	Counterfactual funding share
A	31.9%	46.9%	56.5%	28.0%
B	32.3%	37.8%	74.4%	24.7%
C	20.4%	62.7%	92.0%	28.6%
D	15.4%	33.8%	65.6%	18.7%

The large increase in quality in Main Panel C, combined with the freezing of the funding share going to Main Panel C, has had a second effect of squeezing some disciplines within Main Panel C. This effect has been most pronounced for Economics.

By fixing the share of total funding going to Main Panel C at REF2014 levels, big increases in total quality in a few disciplines (Business +139.0 per cent, Sport and Leisure +118.0 per cent and Architecture +104.5 per cent) have crowded out funding for other disciplines within Main Panel C. Despite growth in quality of 60 per cent, Economics has lost 16.2 per cent of its funding in real terms, the largest fall of any discipline. Geography and Education have also lost, respectively 9.0 per cent and 4.7 per cent of their funding.

Reduced funding for Economics is a direct consequence of freezing the funding shares for the Main Panels. The consequence of the freeze is that increases in total quality translate into arbitrary changes in total funding for different disciplines, depending on which Main Panel the discipline sits in:

- Economics total quality increased by around 60 per cent and its funding went down by 16.2 per cent.
- Psychology (Main Panel A) saw a similar increase in quality, but its funding went up by 10.4 per cent
- Chemistry (Main Panel B) saw a similar increase in quality, but its funding went down by 2.5 per cent
- History (Main Panel C) saw a similar increase in quality, but its funding went up by 3.4 per cent.

The vision of the REF is to provide evidence on where excellence lies in order to focus funding on excellence. Removing the link between the assessment of excellence and the allocation of funding threatens this vision. It downgrades Social Science Research and, within Social Science, Economics emerges as the biggest loser.

Link to underlying analysis: bit.ly/3CKerBo

Hunt,T., Low, H. and Smith, S. "Understanding REF allocations in 2022" University of Oxford Discussion Paper