



Showrunner
Communications

REF 2028 and the future of policy engagement

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Showrunner Communications



Showrunner Communications is an agency that builds reputations, relationships and influence for experts and innovators.

Showrunner specialises in helping academics to achieve policy impact with their work, running training programmes, coaching sessions and proactive public affairs programmes. Over the past year Showrunner has worked with universities including Durham, Exeter, Essex and Manchester Metropolitan, running over 30 training workshops and supporting over 150 academics to engage with policymakers.

Introduction

Earlier this year, the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP), represented by the research funding councils for all four nations in the UK, published its initial proposals for the future of the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

While subject to ongoing consultation, the proposals for REF 2028 may have significant implications for research impact on policy. This allows us to think differently about how we recognise and reward the positive impact of research on people, places and the planet.

In this paper, we explore what the proposals could mean for academics and their institutions, and how you can optimise your approach to policy engagement.

At Showrunner Communications, we believe that academic research and expertise has a vital role to play within the policymaking process, and in contributing to lasting social change.

Just as public policy can benefit from access to world-leading knowledge and expertise, it can also create the conditions for researchers and academic institutions to respond to our most pressing societal challenges.

From climate change through to the cost of living, research from all disciplines has the potential to make a difference.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the most detailed assessment of university research in the UK, carried out every seven years, and used to determine the proportion of public funding allocated to individual universities for research.

While REF isn't the only reason why researchers might want to engage with policy, it's undeniably an important driver given the level of funding and attention it attracts.

REF outcomes are used to inform the allocation of around £2 billion per year of public funding for universities' research, and individual institutions spent an average of £3 million each on their submissions to REF 2021.

The REF 2028 proposals indicate the next assessment process will take a more holistic view of research impact than previous exercises. This is good news for policy engagement and impact, which is often characterised by contribution rather than attribution, and social progress rather than observable impact.

Here are three ways that you can make a difference.

Executive summary

01

Engagement matters

A new focus on engagement creates opportunities for different types of policy impact to emerge, embracing rather than ignoring its complexity.

Three ways you can increase your profile with policymakers:

- Generate media coverage by a sharing your expertise, or shining a light on your research.
- Contribute expert evidence, through policy inquiries, secondments and working groups.
- Become part of the 'policy circuit', working with people and organisations outside of academic who share your ambitions for policy change.

02

Impact matters

Research impact on society remains highly valued, and creates opportunities for universities to shape a wider narrative about their approach to policy impact. This might explore the impact of research across a whole discipline, and its broader societal benefits.

Three ways to give yourself a head start:

- It's never too early to start. Engage with policymakers throughout your research, not just at the end of it.
- Know why you are doing it. Remaining focused on your end goal will help you to prioritise.
- Be consistent. Investing in your relationships now will create more opportunities in the long run.

03

Research-enabling staff matter

The proposed inclusion of researchers and research-enabling staff within REF 2028 submissions rightly recognises their vital contribution across the research lifecycle.

Five ways that research-enabling staff can contribute to policy engagement and impact:

- Making sense of the policy landscape and opportunities for change.
- Identifying key policy stakeholders.
- Building partnerships, alliances and coalitions.
- Developing policy messages and communicating for policy change.
- Evaluating the impact of policy influencing activity.

01

Engagement matters

A new focus on engagement creates opportunities for different types of policy impact to emerge.

One of the FRAP's most revelatory proposals is the decision to rename REF's impact element as 'Engagement and Impact'. This is important because a common criticism levelled at previous REF exercises is that they have asked us to think in terms of an imagined formula for influencing policy change:

strong research + effective engagement with policymakers = policy impact

The process is rarely so straightforward. Instead, the relationship between research and policy is highly nuanced, often ambiguous, and necessarily responsive to a changing policy landscape.

The proposed shift in emphasis towards engagement for REF 2028 creates the possibility of viewing routes to policy impact more holistically, embracing rather than ignoring their complexity.

Further, it addresses another unintended consequence of previous REF exercises, which encouraged institutions to value observable impact (for example, recommendations accepted by a select committee) over equally valuable, but less measurable, forms of engagement (for example, contribution to public debate).

Here, we share some of our top tips for engaging successfully with policymakers.

Generate media coverage

- Apply your expertise and analysis to the news agenda through comment and interview appearances.
- Introduce ideas and deepen understanding by writing for non-academic outlets.
- Shine a light on research work by securing coverage for emerging findings and outputs.

Contribute expert evidence

- Seek out opportunities to submit written evidence to formal processes - particularly Government consultations and Select Committee inquiries.
- When the opportunity arises, give oral evidence to Select Committees.
- Explore opportunities to work directly with policymakers, for example secondments, exchange programmes, and working groups.

Become part of the 'policy circuit'

- Seek out think tanks, campaign groups and networks that align with your interests and perspective.
- Monitor for conferences, panel discussions and other events you could speak at or attend.
- Network, make connections and build relationships with policy professionals and policy-engaged academic colleagues.

02

Impact matters

Research impact on society remains highly valued, and creates opportunities to shape a wider policy narrative.

The Engagement and Impact element of the next REF aims to draw on the best of previous exercises. Like REF 2021, impact will carry a weighting of 25%, demonstrating a continuing commitment that the fruits of publicly funded research should benefit society.

And like REF 2014, we will see a return of an impact narrative alongside individual impact case studies. This narrative aims to give institutions space to explain how they go about maximising the impact of their research across a whole discipline, and the broader societal benefits it has been possible to achieve.

For REF 2028, the accompanying statement will account for a much bigger slice of the pie than in previous exercises. Depending on the size of the submission, this could be somewhere between 20% and 50% of the overall impact score.

(Side note: scoring for the REF is complicated, and impact case studies continue to be highly valuable. For some institutions, an impact case study could be worth ten times that of a research output).

This is good news for policy engagement, which is often cumulative, collaborative and characterised by the contribution of many fields of research.

Ready to make an impact? Here are three ways you can give yourself a head start:

It's never too early

Your opportunities for policy impact will be greater if you engage throughout your research, not just at the end of it. This is especially true if you are hoping to engage policymakers with a breadth of research within your university.

Can you gain an understanding of policymakers' priorities by seeking their perspectives? Can you help by sharing emerging findings or data? Can you invite key stakeholders to visit your university and learn more about your research?

Know why you are doing it

Policy engagement can absorb a lot of time, and its trajectory can be hard to predict. Remaining focused on your end goal will help you to prioritise your activities accordingly.

Who do you want to influence? Do you want to have an impact locally, regionally, nationally or internationally? What would positive change look like for you?

Be consistent

Remember that it takes time to build relationships with policymakers and other stakeholders. Investing in your relationships now, will help to create more opportunities in the long run.

03

Research-enabling staff matter

By placing a new emphasis on 'capturing the valuable contributions of a wider range of researchers and research-enabling staff', REF 2028 has the potential to be more inclusive than ever before.

The proposed inclusion of non-academic researchers and research-enabling staff within REF 2028 submissions rightly recognises the vital contribution of non-academic colleagues and collaborators, who each play a vital role in creating the conditions for policy engagement to thrive.

Research is sometimes described as a 'team sport'. Therefore, it is hugely positive to see the REF moving away from what has historically been a 'hero' model of achieving research impact, to a game plan that recognises you need every player on the pitch.

The removal of the requirement for impact case studies to be underpinned by a 2* (at least) research output is also helpful in enabling more authentic and organic forms of engagement with policy to emerge.

So, what can you do as a non-academic to maximise the impact of your institution's impact on policy? Whether you're an impact specialist, a communications pro, or in a partnerships role, you're ideally placed to spot the big opportunities relevant to your institution's research priorities.

Understand the landscape

What are the big issues, and what are the opportunities to influence change? You might want to conduct a PESTEL analysis to understand the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal factors relevant to your work.

Identify your stakeholders

Who are you going to engage? Stakeholder mapping can help you to build a picture of who is most important to involve in your policy engagement plan, and why.

Build alliances and coalitions

How will you get yourself known on the policy circuit? Are there think tanks, events, or other opportunities to make your voice heard?

Get your message across

How will you position your expertise within policy debate, and what channels will you use?

Evaluate your impact

What difference have you made, and how do you know? You might want to compare your initial goals to the policy outcomes that were achieved, at each stage asking 'how did our research contribute'?

How we can help

At Showrunner Communications, we're optimistic about the potential of the REF 2028 proposals to change how we understand and reward policy impact in future.

And we're on hand to help you navigate the road ahead, offering a range of services to meet your needs.

How we can help:

- Online training workshops that build understanding of policy making institutions and processes
- In-person development masterclasses to help academics hone their policy influencing techniques and skills
- Bespoke toolkits to guide individual academics on how to direct and prioritise policy influencing activity
- Ongoing support for individual academics and research centres seeking to build their profiles and influence among policy audiences

Many of our projects are funded through UK Research & Innovation's (UKRI) policy support fund. This funding allows universities to offer activities aimed at building relationships between universities and policymakers, and training to better equip academics to communicate effectively with policymakers. Please feel free to drop us a line if you'd like to understand more about how this works.

Contact us



At Showrunner Communications, many of our team have held senior roles at research-intensive universities and we pride ourselves on our deep experience of supporting researchers to achieve policy impact.

Mark Fuller

Founding Director & Lead HE Consultant

mark@showrunnercomms.com

WHY PEOPLE CHOOSE US

Don't just take our word for it. Here's what some of the academics we've worked with have to say:

"Showrunner's trainers really understood universities and pitched everything perfectly for an academic audience - which is unusual in my experience. Their workshops were very engaging and interactive. I feel much more confident and able to think strategically about policy impact, particularly in how to work with the media in a way that suits me."

Dr Sarah Bulmer, Senior Lecturer, University of Exeter

"My policy coaching sessions with Showrunner are helping me to carve out the key policy findings within my work and target them more specifically, getting them heard in the right places."

Professor Michelle McManus, Manchester Metropolitan University