

INORMS SCOPE Case Study:

The UK Higher Education Funding Bodies:

Developing a new national research evaluation system

SCOPE is a five-step framework for evaluating research responsibly.

It invites evaluators to:

S - START with what they value about the entity being evaluated;

C – Consider the CONTEXT in which the evaluation takes place;

O – Explore all the OPTIONS for evaluating – both quantitative and qualitative;

P – PROBE their approach for unintended consequences;

E – EVALUATE - and evaluate the evaluation.

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

What was being evaluated?

The system for assessing the quality of research in UK universities

How did they go about it?

The SCOPE framework structured the four UK higher education funding bodies' development of their 'Future Research Assessment Programme' (FRAP), informing a series of 'round-tables' and consultation events with a view to supporting the development of the next national research evaluation exercise.

What were the outcomes for the UK higher education funding bodies?

- A structured approach to the redesign of the next national research evaluation exercise which focused on 'evaluating with the evaluated' and an articulation of what the community values about research.
- A clear understanding of the negotiable and non-negotiable 'contexts' in which the evaluation sits and a means of exploring some of their 'options' for evaluating.
- Ensuring proper scrutiny of the potential perverse effects and unintended consequences of potential evaluation models.

What were the learning points for the SCOPE team?

- What mattered was not only evaluating with the evaluated but evaluating with all those impacted by the evaluation.
- The cost of running a newly designed evaluation needs to be weighed against the cost of changing the format of an evaluation for which there are already established support structures in place.
- The use of spectra to gauge stakeholder communities' appetite for different evaluation options.

1 Overview of the evaluation activity

- **Organisation name:** Research England
- **Interviewee:** Catriona Firth
- **Interviewers:** Elizabeth Gadd and Laura Himanen
- **Focus of evaluation:** Informing the redesign of the UK national research evaluation exercise

2 The process

Background

Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales are currently undertaking a review of the UK's national research assessment exercise (the Future Research Assessment Programme - FRAP). The outcomes of the current system are used to inform the allocation of quality-related research funding to UK universities and provide accountability for public investment in research. It was felt that without a proper framework such a review could focus narrowly on making minor adjustments to the existing system ('evolution') or solely rely on learning from other international research assessment approaches ('reproduction') when what the funding bodies really sought was a root-and-branch review (possible 'revolution'). It was felt that the SCOPE framework offered a structure for thinking about such a review, providing "the perfect brief to be radical". The use of SCOPE by the funding bodies was unmediated by the INORMS Research Evaluation Group.

Use of SCOPE

The FRAP team were keen to 'Start with what was valued' about the research system. Deploying the 'Evaluate with the evaluated' principle, they held a series of round-table events with different stakeholder groups. To create a healthy system, it was important to the team to not only start with what was valued, but to also agree which of those valued things should be evaluated. Understanding the 'Contexts' in which the national research evaluation exercise should take place was an important step in the process. The UK REF currently serves a wide range of purposes and the team sought to identify which were non-negotiable, in this case the purposes of 'Allocation' and 'Accountability'. The 'Contexts' stage also prompted thinking about influence of the wider international context of research evaluation, contributing to the decision to form an International Advisory Group to provide expertise, challenge, and knowledge of alternative approaches in other national contexts.

The FRAP team were inspired by the Options stage of exploring both qualitative and quantitative options to develop a set of spectra to understand the community's appetite for different variables, for example, around the degree of automation, centralisation, granularity and frequency (see figure 1).

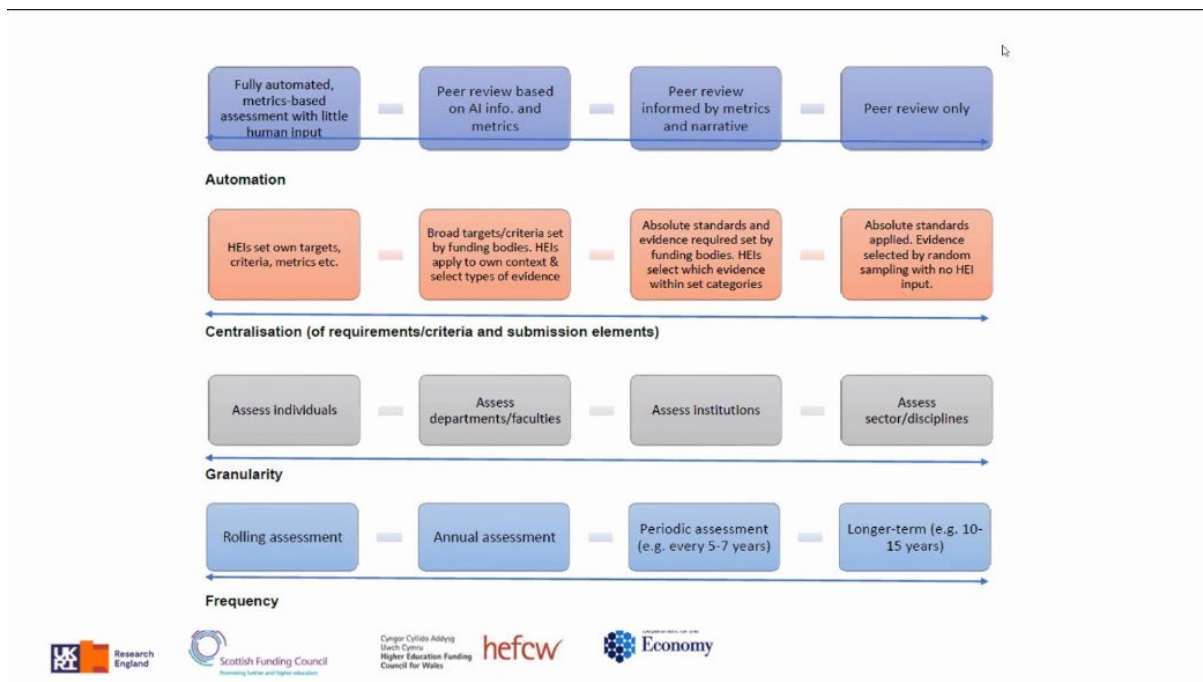


Figure 1. Spectra used to identify stakeholder appetites for different evaluation variables

Of particular interest to the funding bodies was to 'Probe deeply' for unintended consequences and perverse incentives. It was recognised that the financial consequences of an institution's REF submission can lead to high levels of institutional investment in optimising their submission. It was important to understand the possible impact of any assessment, particularly on groups that were already under-represented. Any replacement for the REF should result in the "least harm", and not just on those with protected characteristics. One example given was that of technicians and other professions who play a significant role in the research process but are not currently eligible for submission to REF in their own right.

An important 'probe' question for the funding bodies was around the cost-benefit ratio of any evaluation. Clearly this is a significant issue for any taxpayer-funded evaluation and the cost of REF exercises always comes under considerable scrutiny.

'Skeleton' vs 'exoskeleton'

The SCOPE framework can work as both a 'skeleton' (i.e., as an invisible internal framework that holds something up) or as an 'exoskeleton' (i.e., as scaffolding that is highly visible). In the FRAP's case, they used it as both an internal framework that structured their thinking, but also as a way of presenting the evaluation design process to their stakeholders. Thus, when the parameters and scope of FRAP was taken to the Programme Board they were presented under the headings of the SCOPE framework. The roundtables also included a short presentation on the SCOPE framework, where appropriate, and sought to explore values, options and possible perverse incentives and unintended consequences.

3 The outcomes for Research England

At the time of writing, the FRAP process is still ongoing, but the use of SCOPE has allowed the team to approach the exercise in a structured way and to help the Programme Board focus in on the purpose of the exercise and to identify the questions that needed to be asked. It was felt that the principle of 'evaluating with the evaluated' and starting with value was an important first step and the use of SCOPE ensured this was not taken as a given. The presentation of options as a series of spectra was also seen as a useful way of structuring the variables presented to groups to ascertain

their appetite for different approaches. It was felt that the use of SCOPE has led to a more flexible, broad conversation, enabling richer, creative and more radical suggestions.

Although the process is still ongoing, some examples of useful learning points surfaced including:

- Research assessment plays a significant role in shaping research culture but is part of a wider system of influences, including funding structures, publishing practices, recruitment and promotions practices, and international league tables. An understanding of the system as a whole is required when designing a new assessment model.
- The need to explore how we define research excellence and what elements of the research process it encompasses.
- The need to consider the balance between rewarding past research performance with rewarding the potential to deliver excellent research based on positive research cultures.
- A recognition that the direct costs of running an evaluation, and the indirect costs of that evaluation on those being evaluated, need to be weighed against the benefit (institutional funding) of the evaluation. However, the fair allocation of research funding was important to all and it was appropriate to spend money to achieve this. 'Proportionate costs were ultimately what was sought here.

Ultimately, the team likened SCOPE to an Equality Impact Assessment which ensured a focus on what was important as a process was designed.

4 Learning points for SCOPE

a) Feedback on the use of the SCOPE framework

i) Did working to the SCOPE framework help you think through your evaluation problem?

Yes. The use of SCOPE took away the "fear of the blank sheet of paper" and provided a systematic way to focus in on what was needed, each step taking the team closer and closer to a usable consultation design. It was felt that the simplicity and flexibility of SCOPE was critical to its usefulness and that deploying SCOPE helped with the robustness of the evaluation design. It was also thought to be useful because it provided questions, not answers, enabling the funding bodies to honestly engage with their stakeholder communities to co-design an evaluation rather than prescribing what that evaluation should look like. This collaborative approach builds on the approach taken by the funding bodies in developing previous assessment systems, which has always been done in close consultation with the sector. SCOPE was described as "highly influential and incredibly useful" to the process of rethinking the approach to national research evaluation in the UK.

ii) Which elements of SCOPE were most/least useful?

All elements of SCOPE were considered useful to this process, as well as the two principles around 'evaluating with the evaluated' and 'evaluating only where necessary'. Early feedback has been that participants particularly appreciated the application of the 'evaluating with the evaluated' principle - although the funding bodies have always been very consultative. One valuable observation here was that it is not only helpful to design the evaluation alongside those being directly evaluated but also with those indirectly evaluated or affected by the evaluation, for example, technicians, research managers and library staff.

Ensuring the evaluation design process started with what stakeholders valued about research has been very fruitful, leading to far more creative and radical thinking that might otherwise have been anticipated. Another element that was of particular benefit were the questions provided, particularly under 'Probe'.

iii) Did the process of engaging with SCOPE bring about other benefits - not necessarily related to the evaluation design?

It is too early to say, however the FRAP team felt that SCOPE might also be useful in other areas of Research England's work and noted its applicability to the Global Research Council's work on Responsible Research Assessment.

b) Next steps

The use of SCOPE so far has been to structure the consultation on the high-level design of the next research evaluation exercise in terms of principles and focus areas. The next step could be the deployment of SCOPE to develop the detailed design of the evaluation system itself, which would form another SCOPE cycle.

Elizabeth Gadd & Laura Himanen
June 2021