



Chartered Association of Business Schools submission to the Technical Advisory Group's call for evidence on KEF metrics

The Chartered ABS would be happy to respond to any additional questions.

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Response to the call for evidence for the KEF metrics

The Chartered Association of Business Schools is pleased to respond to the HEFCE's call for evidence on the metrics for the Knowledge Exchange Framework.

The Chartered ABS is the voice of the UK's business and management education sector. More university students study a business school course than any other subject in our universities. They are popular not only with domestic students, but also with international students. Approximately 1 in 3 of all international students study in a business school. Management students go on to lead global businesses and become entrepreneurs who contribute to our dynamic economy. Business school research has an impact across society and helps to turn our capacity for invention into viable businesses. While MBAs may enjoy the highest profile of all business school programmes, they make up a very small proportion of what business schools do. In terms of student numbers, they make up less than 5% of the over 325,000 students studying in business schools in the UK. This does not take in to account short programmes, often offered under the umbrella of Executive Education, which caters for an increasing number of open and bespoke programmes delivered to employees in both large and small firms. Our members, which consist of 120 business schools and higher education providers across all of the UK, contribute to the body of research for and about business.

- 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?**
- 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?**
- 3. What new (or not currently collected) data might be useful to such a framework?**
- 4. How should KEF metrics be visualised to ensure they are simple, transparent and useful to a non-specialist audience?**
- 5. Any other comments?**

Rather than take these questions one by one we have put forward our points all under one heading. It has been difficult to answer the questions posed because there are still too many unknowns. This is understandable, but we would suggest that rather than rushing to have 'something' in place, time is taken to get it right. For us, the key questions that need to be addressed before we can make a meaningful contribution to what metrics would be useful are:

- a. What definition of 'Knowledge Exchange' is being used? Is it a broad definition, or narrow?
- b. What is the purpose of measuring it?
- c. How is it meant to differ from REF Impact measures and/or the HE-BCI report?
- d. Is the KEF to be measured at individual, subject, or institutional level?
- e. What will be the consequences of a poor KEF score?

- f. Is it quality or quantity that will be measured? Is it inputs or outputs, financial, quantitative, qualitative measures that are seen as important?
- g. How often is it envisaged the KEF would be measured? Yearly, or less regularly?

The concept of the KEF appears to be driven by tech transfer, and it is not necessarily the case that what are appropriate measurements for tech transfer will account for all of the “rich network of collaborations between universities and businesses”¹.

Further, such ‘frameworks’ are generally devised to find solutions to perceived problems. As the most recent HE-BCI report states, “data collected for the academic year 2015-16 shows a continuing increase in the exchange of knowledge between UK HEIs and the public, private, and third sectors.”² Further, the MacMillan Review found that “all evidence suggests . . . that the UK university system is competitive in technology transfer.”³ The issue that is trying to be solved is therefore unclear. It would be helpful if this could be articulated.

It becomes even less clear when it is considered that the REF now contains an increasing focus on impact. The impact measure reflects the purpose and outcomes of the research in question. Admittedly this is only applied to those pieces of research submitted, but on the basis that all researchers will be keen to have their research submitted to the REF, and to be scored highly, it follows that this concentration on impact is having a significant effect.

There is a general concern that there will be duplication of effort, and a risk of double-counting between the REF and the KEF. There is a risk that at best the KEF is inefficiently efficient, and at worst could lead to contradictory results if the same data is used in different ways. With separate panels and separate metrics, it is possible that an institution with a low REF impact score could receive a high KEF score, or vice versa. This would be confusing for everyone.

Another question that would be useful to have clarified is, at what level will the KEF be applied? Is it’s focus on the individual, the subject, or the institution level? Knowledge Exchange occurs at the individual level, where relationships are formed, but this is hugely difficult to measure in any meaningful way.

It may be expected that business schools would fare well in an analysis of Knowledge Exchange, but the concerns expressed above are still relevant to them. Business schools are often the ‘connectors’ between business and the wider university.

There is also a question about why there needs to be a comparison between universities. What is this trying to achieve? It is already the case that where a university does not engage with businesses they will not have programmes that would be eligible for HEIF funding. To punish those institutions in more rural areas, with fewer large companies to provide financial support for joint projects, seems unreasonable. It could even be argued that these institutions require greater funding.

A fairer way to allocate funding is for institutions to have to make a competitive application for funding for specific projects. In this way, the right solutions can be delivered in the right places, regardless of past success in receiving corporate funding. This would also enable the funding to reflect the intention of the industrial strategy, rather than work counter to it.

¹ Industrial strategy white paper: *Building a Britain for the future*

² Higher Education - Business and Community Interaction Survey 2015-16

³ University KE Framework: Good Practice in Technology Transfer

We know that the committee will be aware of the risk of unintended consequences. As the cliché goes, what gets measured, gets done. If the main measure is financial, focus on working with public institutions, charities, and social enterprises, will diminish. As will other activities that deliver indirect benefits. These non-financial elements are much more difficult to measure, which means that any attempt to measure them will be problematic and time consuming. Will business schools be deterred from working with SMEs, because their pockets are not as deep?

Examples of the types of activities that business schools engage in that may be classified as Knowledge Exchange that may or may not already appear in either REF impact studies or the HE-BCI survey include:

- Writing blogs and articles for the Small Business Charter website, which includes an audience of entrepreneurs and would-be entrepreneurs
- Speaking at workshops and conferences for the same
- Providing an incubator space for company start-ups
- Business people becoming lecturers, or entrepreneurs-in-residence
- Many business schools have advisory boards of business people to help steer the strategic direction of the school
- The Small Business Charter Management Board is made up of equal numbers of entrepreneurs and academics. Would this involvement in this count?
- Public media work such as radio or television, which is not included in HE-BCI measures
- Engagement with apprenticeships
- Cross or interdisciplinary work with other departments, especially if KEF is to be measured at subject level.

The Chartered ABS would be very happy to work with the committee to derive ways of measuring all of this once we have the answers to the questions above.

We are pleased to see that the committee is considering the consequence of place in this analysis and would point out that if 'success' is rewarded with additional funding, the HE-BCI analysis would suggest that Northern Ireland, Wales, the North East and the South West would be at the end of the queue for funding. This cannot be right.

Solution

If, having considered the basic initial questions, it is decided that a separate KEF is required and there is a decision on what it is to include, we suggest a system that considers the full breadth of university-business engagement. This is not measured at present and is unlikely to be collated in any uniform way across institutions, if at all. Therefore, this will require significant additional work by the universities.

We would suggest that benchmarking is unnecessary and unhelpful. It should not be the intention to shoehorn all universities to have the same types of engagement. For the same reason we would argue that 'relative' performance constrains rather than liberates universities finding new ways to engage with companies. Instead we would recommend a hurdle rate, similar to the one used by the Small Business Charter, which is run by the Chartered ABS, which recognises business schools offering significant and evidenced support for small businesses. There are 31 criteria against which schools are judged. In the three-year history of the award no school has been judged to be successful in all aspects. Only those achieving a minimum number of criteria are granted the award. This allows for regional and school differences and for innovation in methods and areas of

engagement. This seems to be a simpler and fairer model to pursue, than one trying to identify which institution is the best or makes the most money.

Giving any great consideration to the way in which KEF metrics are *presented* seems to be a distraction, at this juncture. This is about presentation and we would suggest it is best to get the content right before worrying about how it is presented. It would be wrong to use one particular metric simply because it looks good in a graphic.

More useful for communicating to companies where they can get help, would be to use the Konfer⁴ website, or to build upon it. It was designed specifically for the purpose of bringing together academics and business and it would seem much more user friendly to non-specialists than graphics showing how much money institutions received from historic collaboration with business.

While we understand the neatness of having a REF, TEF and KEF, we believe it to be unnecessary. There are sufficient measures already available, for example HE-BCI and REF impact measures, as well as ways for business to engage with universities through individual university websites and the Konfer database. To reinforce the importance of these is all that is required, rather than developing a complex 'framework'.

Whatever decisions are made on the need for a KEF, we would urge that nothing is entered into with undue haste. It is more important to get things right, than fast. Universities are already having to deal with a revised model for the REF, the introduction of subject level TEF and further changes around the TEF, and the introduction of the Office for Students. Universities need to be able to adjust to these, plus the impact of Brexit, as well as getting on with the job of educating students, conducting research, and engaging with companies of all types. Additional burden and constant measurement will not necessarily lead to better outcomes.

⁴ <https://konfer.online/>