

Performance-Based Research Fund Sector Reference Group: Consultation paper #3 – Developing Evidence Portfolios – operational guidance for the Research Contribution component Sector feedback and SRG in-principle decisions

Purpose

The Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) Sector Reference Group has developed operational guidance to support the new Research Contribution component of Evidence Portfolios and consulted the sector and other stakeholders on a range of proposals.

This document provides:

- a summary of the responses received;
- details on any concerns raised relating to the proposals; and
- the Tertiary Education Commission's (TEC's) in-principle decisions on each of the proposals.

Introduction

Consultation paper #3 - Developing Evidence Portfolios – operational guidance for the Research Contribution component provided the sector and other key stakeholders with background information on the review of the PBRF by the Ministry of Education that resulted in the establishment of the Research Contribution component, information on the Peer Esteem (PE) and Contribution to the Research Environment (CRE) components, set out the proposed operational framework for the submission of items of Research Contribution in the 2018 Quality Evaluation, and invited feedback on the proposals and any other matters not raised in the paper.

Feedback on this consultation paper was invited through the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) from 4 December 2014 to 11 February 2015. Consultation has now closed.

A total of 17 responses were received. These were from:

- Auckland University of Technology
- Christchurch Polytechnic Institute Of Technology
- Lincoln University
- Massey University
- New Zealand Tertiary Council for Physical Activity, Sport and Exercise (NZTCPASE)
- Open Polytechnic
- Otago Polytechnic
- Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi
- Tertiary Education Union Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa
- University of Auckland
- University of Canterbury
- University of Otago
- University of Waikato
- Victoria University of Wellington
- 3 individual staff members

The Ministry of Education and Callaghan Innovation also provided feedback. Feedback has been anonymised.

Process information

The SRG has considered the feedback from the sector and other stakeholders relating to each of the matters identified in the consultation paper. The SRG has indicated its preferred option which has been recommended to the TEC.

The TEC has approved these recommendations in-principle on the understanding that the consultation process is on-going and other decisions or external factors may require these recommendations to be reconsidered as part of the development of the final guidelines.

Next steps

The SRG will use the in-principle decisions as the basis of the draft guidelines for the 2018 Quality Evaluation. These guidelines will be provided to the sector and other stakeholders for consultation before they are finalised in June 2016. The purpose of the consultation on the draft guidelines is to ensure that the guidance is clear and unambiguous, not to re-consult on matters already consulted upon and agreed.

Requests have been received for the TEC to display (via an online forum) questions raised by TEOs about aspects of the guidelines and any TEC response to these. The feedback summary from the first consultation paper indicated TEC's support for this proposal and the TEC expects to implement this when the draft guidelines are released for consultation.

Organisation of summary

Each of the 17 responses has been analysed. Feedback is summarised according to the following sections:

- A. Proposed definition of Research Contribution
- B. Research Contribution categories
- C. Information on Research Contribution to be included in an EP
- D. Presentation of Research Contribution items
- E. Allowing items outside the assessment period
- F. Evidence and Audit
- G. Scoring the Research Contribution component
- H. Any other matters

A. Proposed definition of Research Contribution

The SRG proposed that the underpinning principle of the definition is that the Research Contribution component should reflect the broad range of activities and outcomes that are undertaken and/or achieved by a researcher relative to opportunity, and be appropriate to an individual's research discipline.

The proposed definition was set out as:

In the PBRF, the Research Contribution component of an Evidence Portfolio allows staff members to highlight the economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits that their research has had in a national and international context. These benefits can include the advancement of Mātauranga Māori as well as supporting technology and knowledge transfer to national and international businesses and communities, iwi, government and society.

The Research Contribution component provides staff members with an opportunity to demonstrate:

- *the esteem in which their peers, within and outside of TEOs, hold their research*

- *their role and the contributions they make, in creating a vital, high-quality research environment, and*
- *the impact that their research has had outside academia.*

Feedback was sought on whether the proposed definition accurately describes the intent of the Research Contribution component and how it contributes to the assessment of the EP.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

	Response %	Response #
Agree with the definition	38%	6
Agree but with changes suggested	31%	5
Disagree	21%	5

It was generally agreed that while the underpinning principle was correct, the definition did not accurately reflect the appropriate balance of the areas that needed to be covered by the Research Contribution component.

There was a level of concern raised in relation to the apparent weighting placed on impact. This was unintended by the SRG and a number of submissions suggested alternative wording.

Concerns were also raised about the inclusion of external impact as an assessable item, along with contributions and esteem outside of academia. Questions were raised as to whether external impact, contributions and esteem are outside the scope of the Research Contribution component, given the amalgamation of the former Contribution to the Research Environment (CRE) and Peer Esteem (PE) components.

Some submitters requested the exclusion of any new or additional assessment of external impact from the 2018 Quality Evaluation process, while others requested having impact as a separate measure in addition to the component itself.

SRG's response to concerns

PBRF Cabinet decisions

As the SRG identified following the release of feedback from the first consultation paper, the Cabinet decisions on changes to the PBRF prevent the inclusion of impact as a stand-alone measure.

The SRG acknowledges that the consultation paper should have more specifically referenced that part of the rationale behind the development of the new component, which was to encourage a range of items to be submitted, including items of research esteem and contribution inside and outside of academia, as well as impact. Specifically the Cabinet paper states;

“More efficient assessment processes will be accompanied by improved operational guidance to better recognise and reward applied research. New guidance for subject area peer review panels will draw on the work of the 2012 Quality Evaluation’s Professional and Applied Expert Advisory Group, which developed detailed criteria for assessing the excellence of applied research. Guidance for teaching and research staff will reinforce that the new Research Contribution measure may include examples of esteem and contribution inside and outside academia. Professional and applied researchers will be encouraged to submit evidence of research application, including impact on policy, professional practice, or business processes, products or services.” (Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, Cabinet Social Policy Committee, [Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance-based research fund](#), 2013, p.8)

The SRG is thus mandated to develop the operational guidance for the Research Contribution component that meets the requirements agreed by Cabinet. The exclusion of this element from the component would go against the Cabinet decision.

The existing PBRF assessment framework and impact

The SRG understands that there are concerns relating to the inclusion of the “Uptake and impact” category. It is, however, important to recognise that the PBRF assessment framework has allowed for the assessment of this since the first Quality Evaluation round. Since [2003](#), the assessment descriptor for the Research Output component has referenced the potential for overlap between the Research Output and Peer Esteem components and allowed for the consideration of impact or uptake by peer review panels. For example, the tie-point descriptor for a score of “6” states “*The research outputs would be likely to result in substantial impact or uptake. Such impacts could also include product development, uptake and dissemination, or significant changes in professional, policy, organisational, artistic or research practices.*” While the tie-point descriptor for a score of “4” states “*The research is likely to contribute to further research activities and to have demonstrable impacts reflected in developments that may include product development, uptake and dissemination, changes in professional, organisational, policy, artistic or research practices.*” (PBRF Guidelines, Scoring an EP: Allocating Points for Research Outputs)

The Professional and Applied Expert Advisory Group identified that while the framework allowed them to consider these aspects in their assessments, the guidance to support researchers to develop this aspect of the EPs was lacking. The group identified that more explicit guidance to tertiary education organisations (TEOs) and PBRF-eligible staff on how best to present evidence of research application and impact was required, as well as providing more space in EPs to describe the impact accruing from research outputs and other activities.

International comparisons

The consideration of impact, in some form, is becoming increasingly common in international assessments of research quality and excellence. Although more common in the assessment and allocation of funding to ventures like New Zealand’s Centres of Research Excellence, the United Kingdom included a separate impact measures for the first time in the 2014 Research Exercise Framework (REF). This decision was taken in order to reflect their commitment to taking account of the impact of research in the REF, and reflected the Government policy aims to maintain and improve the achievements of the higher education sector in regard to undertaking ground-breaking research of the highest quality and building on this research to achieve demonstrable benefits to the wider economy and society.¹

While the decision was made not to take a similar approach with the PBRF, it was recognised that the inclusion of impact is consistent with international practice particularly in relation to applied research.

The SRG recognise that there are challenges with attribution, corroboration and assessment of impact, however there are lessons that can be learnt from other countries and exercises in this regard.

Conclusion

In summary, the SRG is committed to meeting Cabinet’s mandate regarding the inclusion of the “Uptake and impact” Research Contribution category and there has been wide support from the sector for its inclusion. As noted in the feedback summary from the first consultation paper, the SRG’s focus will be on:

¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England, Research Excellence Framework, Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research, September 2009, p.13.

- a. providing advice to the sector regarding what information and evidence should be included in an EP if a researcher **chooses** to submit entries in the Research Contribution component on uptake and impact; and
- b. ensuring that the guidelines for peer review panels support appropriate assessment of these entries.

In-principle decision

The SRG has considered all the feedback provided and revised the definition. The text below will be included in the draft guidelines.

The Research Contribution component of an Evidence Portfolio describes the contribution and recognition of a staff member's research and research-related activities.

The Research Contribution component provides staff members with an opportunity to demonstrate:

- *the esteem in which their peers, within and outside of TEOs, hold their research;*
- *their role and the contributions they make, in creating a vital, high-quality research environment; and*
- *any impact that their research has had outside academia.*

Research Contribution items will be indicators of a vital, high quality research environment. Items may also provide indicators of the social, cultural, environmental and economic benefits of the research including the advancement of Mātauranga Māori. Research Contribution items may be local, national and/or international in orientation and impact.

In the context of the PBRF, it is recognised that the items submitted within Evidence Portfolios will differ across the three areas and the 12 Research Contribution categories.

B. Research Contribution categories

The SRG proposed 12 Research Contribution categories which aggregate the previous 18 PE and CRE categories and introduces two new categories that allow researchers to include evidence-based examples of the contributions they make to the wider community in New Zealand and internationally; and uptake and impact of their research outside of academia.

The SRG developed a descriptor, with indicators that include but are not limited to the examples set out in the descriptor, for each of the categories. The purpose of the description and the indicators are to assist researchers to categorise their activities for PBRF purposes. There are activities that may be considered as more than one category. In these cases, staff members would need to decide which category best suits the activity. The range of examples has been developed to include activities that are likely to be relevant to new and emerging researchers as well as a variety of disciplines.

Feedback was requested on all information set out in the table, but specifically:

- Do the 12 proposed categories cover all aspects of esteem, contribution and impact that could be expected in the context of PBRF?
- Are there any activities not covered by these categories?
- Is the category description useful?
- Are there better or more relevant examples of activities that should be included as indicators for the categories?

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do the 12 proposed categories cover all aspects of esteem, contribution and impact that could be expected in the context of PBRF?	Response %	Response #
Yes (including some comments/changes)	93%	13
No (significant comments/changes)	7%	1

Are there any activities not covered by these categories?	Response %	Response #
Yes (including some comments)	30%	3
No	70%	7

Is the category description useful?	Response %	Response #
Yes (including some comments/changes)	92%	11
No (significant comments/changes)	8%	1

Are there better or more relevant examples of activities that should be included as indicators for the categories?	Response %	Response #
Yes (including some comments/changes)	43%	3
No	57%	4

The majority of feedback supported the proposed categories, descriptors and examples of activities. Useful suggestions regarding the descriptors and examples of activities were provided by a number of submitters and the SRG has noted these and will incorporate this feedback in a revised version of the table.

Questions were raised regarding whether staff members could include items in more than one of the 12 categories (e.g. three entries under “Research funding and support” and four under “Researcher development”), or whether staff members were expected to complete an entry under each of the 12 Research Contribution categories. The SRG confirms that in this regard, no changes to the current process are proposed. Staff members would, as they currently do, choose those activities that best represent their research activity over the assessment period. Those activities can then be aligned with the appropriate category and individuals can include a particular category more than once.

Concerns were raised regarding the high-level category types not recognising difference in quality or status (e.g. invitations for an invited speaker versus a plenary speaker). The SRG is of the view that staff members need to provide sufficient information and evidence of the quality and prestige of their research and research-related activity that will enable panel judgement to be appropriately applied.

In-principle decision

Implement the 12 proposed categories and consider all feedback provided relating to the descriptions and activities in a revised table in the draft guidelines.

C. Information on Research Contribution to be included in an EP

The SRG proposed maintaining the status quo in relation to the description field for Research Contribution component entries. This meant that the details of the example or activity, relevant dates, and other organisations involved needed to be contained within a 1,024 maximum character limit. However the SRG proposed that some information could be included in a tabular form for some categories, for example supervision of students and research funding. This would mean a summary table of quantitative data supported by a narrative could be presented in the EP.

Feedback was requested on the inclusion of summary quantitative data for examples of supervision of students and research funding, as well as whether there are other categories where information could be provided in a table.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Should a summary of qualitative data be provided for examples of supervision of students and research funding?	Response %	Response #
Yes	69%	11
No	12%	2
Possibly	19%	3

There was a high level of support for providing some Research Contribution component information in tabular form. A number of responses suggested a wide variety of ways that this information could be presented, and what should be included.

Concerns were also raised about whether only having some information set out as quantitative data would unfairly advantage or disadvantage some submitters. There was also concern that the use of summative tables lays the assessment process open to semi-quantitative analysis and implied weightings with volume being measured in lieu of an examination of excellence and impact.

The nature of summative tables means that the format and content of the table needs to be strictly defined. The SRG has noted that it may be difficult to provide a solution that delivers the level of granularity required to appropriately assess the contribution, for example whether a staff member is a primary or co-supervisor, when the supervision occurred, if it was complete or in-progress. There are also concerns that it may be difficult for staff members to avoid duplication, and/or make clear and coherent links between quantitative and qualitative data.

In-principle decision

Do not implement the proposal to include summary quantitative data for examples of supervision of students and research funding.

Are there are other Research Contribution categories where information could be provided as a summary table?	Response %	Response #
No	8%	1
Yes (including some suggestions)	84%	11
The table should extend to each category or none at all	8%	1

Suggestions for additional tables included

- invitations to present research or similar, conference invitations and/or participation
- academic reviews (for example, how many invited to do; how many completed for categories such as journal articles; book chapters; funding proposals; book proposals; grants etc.)
- research funding, prizes/awards
- external grant information (for example, Role, Project title, Funder, total amount secured)
- editorial contributions and journal reviews (as long as the table included information about the journal and the number of contributions/date range of participation)
- appointments, editorships and examinations

The wide range of suggestions for additional tables, along with the commentary indicates a potential for highly complex system requirements. This would have an impact on both TEO and TEC system functionality and impose compliance costs.

In-principle decision

Do not implement the proposal to include summary quantitative data for any other Research Contribution types.

Feedback was also requested on the proposal to maintain the 1024 character limit for each entry.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Should the 1024 character limit be extended?	Response %	Response #
Yes	38%	5
No	62%	8

While the majority supported maintaining the current limits, a number of responses indicated that a small increase in the character limit would allow staff members to better explain their contributions, particularly as the number of entries was so significantly reduced.

In-principle decision

Implement an increase to 1,500 characters for the Research Contribution Description fields.

D. Presentation of Research Contribution items

Some TEOs submitting EPs to the 2012 Quality Evaluation clustered items by the PE and CRE category, while others did not. Feedback from some peer review panels was for a greater level of consistency in the presentation of this information.

Three options were consulted on, these and the responses are set out below.

	Response %	Response #
<i>Option 1: Maintain the status quo.</i>	13%	2
<i>Option 2: Require all Research Contribution items to be clustered by category (this is the SRG's preferred option).</i>	74%	12
<i>Option 3: Provide advice on the standardised ordering of Research Contribution categories in the panel-specific guidelines.</i>	13%	2

There was strong support for requiring all Research Contribution items to be clustered by category (Option 2). This option would still allow staff members to choose the order of their items to a degree, for example if their most highly valued item was in the “Research prizes, fellowships, awards and appointments” category, then this would be presented first with any other items in this category following, then they would choose the next item from another category.

Concerns were raised that a staff member’s most significant item could be relegated to the last position. The reduction in the number of total items reduces concerns that important items would become ‘lost’ in the list, and panel training can also mitigate on this concern.

There was also support for the inclusion of guidance in panel-specific guidelines on the perceived ‘value’ of items which will therefore affect the ordering of items included in a portfolio. This can be addressed through the panel process.

In-principle decision

Implement Option 2: Require Research Contribution items to be clustered by category.

E. Allowing items outside the assessment period

In the 2012 Quality Evaluation the guidelines advised that for PE, staff members could include research related major prizes and awards from outside the assessment period but the panel would give primary weight to those peer esteem items gained within the assessment period. Staff members could also include items of CRE from outside the assessment period if the contribution was outstanding or of particular significance.

Peer review panel members raised concerns with the TEC during the assessment process regarding the validity of items in the PE and CRE component. As a result of discussions between the submitting TEO and the TEC, a number of PE and CRE were removed from EPs due to the items being outside the assessment period and not fulfilling the exception provisions. The TEC identified, at the time, that the lack of definition regarding what could be considered a ‘major prize or award’ or what contributions could be considered ‘outstanding or of particular significance’ resulted in a lack of clarity and consistency in the application of the provision.

The SRG proposed to remove the exceptions provisions for the Research Contribution component and sought feedback on this proposal.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Should the exceptions provisions be removed for the Research Contribution component?	Response %	Response #
Yes	80%	12
No	13%	2
Possibly	7%	1

There was strong support for the removal of this provision; however there appears to be some misunderstanding of the provision as it relates to prizes, awards and fellowships awarded outside the assessment period but which continue to apply within the assessment period.

The current rules allow for major and on-going prizes, awards and fellowships to be included in an EP. The 2012 PBRF Guidelines state:

“Where the award or fellowship is ongoing (e.g. fellowship of learned society), these can be included in the EP even though the appointment was outside the assessment period. For example, appointment as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 2000 can be included as a peer esteem example for the 2012 Quality Evaluation if the fellowship was held during the assessment period.” (PBRF 2012 Guidelines, p.72)

In-principle decision

Implement the removal of the exceptions provision and clarify that major items that were awarded outside the period but continue to be apply within the assessment are eligible for inclusion in EPs. Specific wording will be developed in the draft guidelines.

F. Evidence and Audit

The SRG sought feedback on whether or not the items in this component should be included in the formal audit process.

Three options were consulted on, these and the responses are set out below.

	Response %	Response #
<i>Option 1: No evidence required in the EP and no formal audit requirements but panel members can raise concerns which the TEC will follow up with the TEO (status quo)</i>	63%	10
<i>Option 2: No evidence required in the EP but the component included in the TEO audit process, and TEOs may be required to provide evidence if requested (this is the SRG’s preferred option).</i>	31%	5
<i>Option 3: Evidence provided in the EP and the component included in the TEO audit process.</i>	6%	1

There was strong support for maintaining the status quo as it relates to the inclusion of evidence and audit for the Research Contribution component. The main concern raised by the sector was compliance costs and the impact on researchers of not being able to provide evidence.

The SRG believe that to ensure that the Quality Evaluation process is seen as fair and robust, there should be an element of formal auditing applied to the Research Contribution component.

In-principle decision

Implement a hybrid option between Option 1 and Option 2 which would result in:

- *no evidence required in the EP; and*
- *including the component in the TEO audit process with a low percentage (i.e. 1% of all items) of items sampled; and*
- *allowing panel members to raise concerns about the eligibility of items which the TEC will follow up with the TEO.*

Information on the standard of evidence required for items will be addressed in subsequent consultation papers and the draft guidelines.

G. Scoring the Research Contribution component

The SRG proposed to retain the 0 – 7 point scoring scale for the Research Contribution component but sought feedback on this proposal and whether there is another alternative scoring scale that should be considered.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Should the 0 – 7 point scoring scale be retained for the Research Contribution component?	Response %	Response #
Yes	92%	12
No	8%	1

There was strong support for retaining the existing scoring system, with one submission identifying an alternative system with a 0-10 scale. Feedback was clear that the current system was well understood by both TEOs and peer review panels, and it is fit-for-purpose. Concerns were raised that any changes may lead to unforeseen complications and noted that many staff members submitting EPs are just coming to an understanding of the current scoring system, which if they request their results, can identify areas for future support and development.

In-principle decision

Retain the 0 – 7 point scoring scale for the Research Contribution component.

The SRG also proposed to include specific advice in the 2018 Guidelines to ensure that all categories of Research Contribution are considered on their merits.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Should specific advice (similar to that provided for the Research Output component) be provided in the PBRF 2018 Quality Evaluation Guidelines to ensure that all types of Research Contribution be considered on their merits?	Response %	Response #
Yes	83%	10
No	17%	2

There was strong support for this proposal with one submission noting that “*It should be a fundamental principle of the entire PBRF process that all types of contributions (categories) are considered on their merits*”.

In-principle decision

Implement the inclusion of specific advice in the PBRF 2018 Quality Evaluation Guidelines to ensure that all types of Research Contribution be considered on their merits (i.e. no one specific type will be weighted higher than another).

H. Any other matters

Most other questions and matters that were raised by the sector have been addressed in the relevant sections of this document, however the SRG has responded to two points separately:

- Training for panellists and information to institutions and staff should include discussion about the importance of understanding what an individual researcher regards as valuable may differ from the perceptions of others.
 - The SRG supports this.
- Concerns that academics who work solely within academic circles may not value applied research so clear indicators are required. Details of scoring would need to be expanded to provide clear guidance. The Panel guidelines could also discuss impact and uptake.
 - The SRG agrees and these aspects will be addressed in subsequent consultation papers, the main and panel-specific guidelines, and through panel training.