



Universities Scotland's response to HEFCE survey on KEF metrics

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?

1. While the development of the KEF is being pursued only in England, its use of UK-wide HEBCI data will mean that third parties are likely to construct parallel analyses for the rest of the UK (the generation of comparisons and performance tables will likely be relatively straightforward). It is therefore important that development of the KEF proceeds in consultation with other UK higher education bodies – particularly to consider the potential increase in, and differential impact of, reporting burden. We would recommend that the Technical Advisory Group formally involves Scottish representation, for example, a representative of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).
2. Scottish HEIs have expressed concerns with the variation within HEBCI due to differences in interpretation of definitions (particularly in terms of the IP section) across institutions. This may lead to inconsistencies in reporting and make fair comparisons difficult.
3. Separately there are concerns about the quality of the data in HEBCI, owing to partial reporting where HEBCI data does not directly leverage funding. For Scottish HEIs completion of HEBCI has been a requirement of grant for a relatively short period of time and is not used to drive funding (unlike for English HEIs). We have some concerns about the use of HEBCI to monitor performance, particularly the use of data from previous years.
4. Should UK-wide comparisons be developed (or possible to develop) and in terms of fair comparison it will be important that KEF metrics factor in input – from 2015/16 HEIF has increased significantly and will soon be worth £250M per year whereas the Scottish equivalent (previously the Knowledge Transfer Grant - KTG, now the Universities Innovation Fund - UIF) has been cut by ~£5M during that same period and is now worth £12M per year. Scottish HEIs may therefore be similar to other UK institutions in terms of other relevant features such as local economic conditions or 'type' and volume of research funding but in the context of more restricted underpinning funding (from an institutional and/or regional perspective). This may impact on what HEIs are able to deliver and should not be presented as 'underperformance'.
5. We consider local economic conditions (particularly low R&D spend in the private sector) to be a key factor in allowing a fair comparison and would encourage that this is factored into deliberations. It could also be useful to factor in institutional size (e.g. full person equivalent) in terms of the scale of knowledge exchange possible.

Other than HEBCI survey data, what other existing sources of data could be used to inform a framework, and how should it be used?

6. As the purpose of the additional funding in England is to support the Industrial Strategy additional metrics may be factored in such as winning other relevant and competitive funding. While not necessarily advocating specific streams, examples may include: Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF) or Connecting Capability Fund (CCF). Again, should UK-wide comparisons be made and on the issue of fair comparison it will be useful to factor in that HEIs in devolved nations are not eligible for certain funds (CCF) and HEIs in devolved nations are not operating in the same environment as English HEIs (due to the mix of devolved and reserved policy commitments) regarding the Industrial Strategy.
7. It is important that HEFCE take a responsible metrics approach to the development of the KEF metrics and consider whether any new sources of data meet the key principles (robustness, humility, transparency, diversity and reflexivity). It is important to consider the potential unintended drivers of adding new measures into a performance framework.

What new (or not currently collected) data might be useful to such a framework?

8. HEFCE must be mindful of the current reporting burden on institutions and to work to ensure this does not increase. For example, additional reporting through HEBCI with the intention of informing KEF metrics may impact Scottish HEIs without any potential benefit. Additionally, Scottish HEIs report annually on KTG metrics and there is ongoing work on the monitoring and evaluation framework for UIF. All of this is significant extra effort on top of HEBCI reporting.

How should KEF metrics be visualised to ensure they are simple, transparent and useful to a non-specialist audience?

9. This depends on the purpose of the KEF metrics, and intended audience(s). KEF metrics will likely be useful to demonstrate the (English) sector's commitment to economic and social benefit and could be useful benchmarking for individual HEIs to develop their activities. These two purposes serve two different audiences. Presentation of the information will have to be considered, particularly with banding and the intention to identify institutions that are 'outperforming' and which have 'scope for improvement'. All UK HEIs are seeking to work with partners, including businesses (locally and internationally), so the KEF metrics need to be clearly explained to a non-specialist audience to ensure clarity of understanding and to support demand for partnership.

Any other comments?

10. The ambition of the KE metrics seems to include measuring benefit to society and the economy, which could essentially cover all knowledge exchange/impact. This will be very challenging to capture in a metrics based approach. This may require further consideration in terms of either the approach to KE metrics or taking a narrower view (and being clear on this) on what the KE metrics system is able to measure.
11. In addition, impact and knowledge exchange work are already captured in the Research Excellence Framework. Duplication should be avoided. In this context it is worth noting the increased weight for impact for the 2021 exercise.
12. As with the current approach to the HEIF formula there may be a need to factor in year-to-year volatility in the metrics used in the KEF system to prevent apparent significant changes in performance driven by a particular measure.

13. Generally we see that innovation-focussed aspects of knowledge exchange is less representative of the wider community. The Technical Advisory Group may wish to consider any scope to capture information on, and promote, equality and diversity through the KE metrics (and/or KE Concordat). Engagement with the REF's Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) may assist with this discussion.
14. Finally, we recommend HEFCE ensure input from a practising knowledge exchange professional on the Technical Advisory Group.

About Universities Scotland

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Further information

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