



# PRAXIS AURIL

## Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) Consultation, March 2019

This response was submitted jointly by PraxisAuril and ARMA. Both memberships were consulted in the drafting of the response which was led by Tamsin Mann, Head of Policy, PraxisAuril.

### **1. Do you consider that the KEF as outlined will fulfil its stated purposes?**

The proposed approach [to the KEF] maintains a focus on metrics with improvements around how numerical data is presented: the move to relating performance to scale and capability is welcomed. Presenting a range of perspectives in a single view (rather than tables of data) may help universities to compare their performance across categories, to develop their own narrative about KEF outcomes and identify where to focus on change. The dynamics of performance across a KE ‘portfolio’ will be more exposed under the KEF and this will surely drive more scrutiny of activity by KE managers. This could lead to tighter ‘fit’ of resources to areas identified for change but could have a detrimental effect on activities that are less easy to link to outcomes and / or income. The benchmarking tool will be a signpost for analysis at the institution level using other tools, such as maturity models that are being developed by PraxisAuril members for example, alongside existing KPIs and performance metrics.

However, the KEF proposals assume some knowledge of KE activities and how they are informed by university mission. It may be hard for a business to understand why particular HEIs are clustered together if their patterns of KE performance are distinctly different (even if demonstrating this is the point of the exercise). The KEF is unlikely to be the determining factor for a business to choose a particular university for partnership; priorities for businesses are ease and simplicity of access to the right expertise and support. All evidence points to the need for further business support simplification, not additional information and benchmarking requirements.

The KEF may provide some assurance to inexperienced partners as an indicator of KE competence in a particular HEI, alongside knowledge or skills which are the initial attractors. Having high quality research in a given discipline does not necessarily mean one is good at KE in related topics and the KEF indicators, focusing on relative scale and engagement, might be a proxy for competence. But maintaining the parallel between quantity and quality begs the question of how institutions primarily serving organisations and/or sectors where the prevailing unit price is low will demonstrate

competence. It also begs the question of how such 'low performers' will improve if demand is discouraged because of perceived lack of KE ability. In these cases, there is a need for more information about how interactions are priced and valued by KE partners.

## **2. Aims and overall approach of the KEF**

The KEF presents a new way of looking at KE performance data and the clusters may give some institutions a fresh way of evaluating their performance. But since the KEF is based on existing HE-BCI data the extent to which the information presented is new is debatable: universities are already able to manipulate annual HE-BCI data to compare outputs. In this respect the HE-BCI review is more significant for the sector. The inclusion of some narrative in the KEF alongside metrics risks drawing attention to those areas above others which we would argue are also worthy of narrative context.

The institutional level approach may mean HEIs take a wider perspective on what 'counts' as KE and raise the profile of KE across functions such as Careers and into teaching activities where employer engagement is key (e.g. for Degree Apprenticeships). This is to be welcomed and fits alongside the Concordat.

An area that still feels unexplored in the KEF is the research capacity within a university i.e. the willingness and ability of academic staff to engage with the Knowledge Exchange agenda: this brings the KEF down to the individual level. Headline figures for KE focus tend to focus on commercialisation but academics who patent also engage with business in other ways, as evidenced in the work of Alan Hughes et al for the NCUB. Hughes' work also reveals stark disciplinary differences in KE activity which neither HE-BCI nor the KEF demonstrates.

If the KEF is going to incentivise institutions to "find a new gear" then it needs to both attract industry and provide academic incentives for engagement outside core research areas. This points to a need to look at academic motivation for using any kind of external impact pathway and the importance of sustaining engagement rather than just trying to create more interactions. We also need to understand more about the different types of engagement prioritised and enabled (e.g. in RCUK KE-focussed funding streams) across academic disciplines.

Effective KE is inextricably linked with the personal choices of researchers themselves and institutional incentives and policies need to be careful to allow those choices to flourish if HEIs are to make the most of external opportunities.

## **3. Proposed clusters and clustering approach**

In our KEF consultation response of January 2018 PraxisAuril said that the KEF needed to allow HEIs to define a KE focus and benchmark performance against others with the same, or similar focus e.g. perhaps targeting a similar customer group or geographic area. The current model does as well as it

can with data that is applicable across the sector but fails to acknowledge the parameter of geographic economy in particular. This can fundamentally shape the opportunities available to an HEI and is particularly important in the context of Local Industrial Strategies.

The cluster approach recognises the difficulty of comparing every HEI in the sector against each other. Common denominators are hard to find, so research income and academic capacity make sense. But this still relates KE very much to grant-funded research activities. Some members have pointed out that much of their KE stems from teaching and/or practice and is not informed by research. It is unclear how the KEF accounts for this type of KE but we feel it's important to recognise – particularly in the context of the Creative Industries and employer engagement through Degree Apprenticeships, for example. The cluster design needs to be flexible so that people can look at these pre-defined peer groups but also create their own clusters that speak to an institutional mission, target audience or change of KE focus.

The clusters do not indicate what capacity an HEI has to deal with KE i.e. to manage enquiries, pursue new opportunities, manage relationships, or deal with more technical issues such as licensing. This capacity has a significant impact on customer service and KE activity development. We would like to explore how the role of this professional staff cohort could be brought out in the KEF. As HEIF is fundamental to providing this support (HEIF strategies analysis shows over 50% spent on staff) one step could be to indicate what 'tier' of HEIF an HEI receives (normalised) or KE support characterised in the cluster descriptions.

For PraxisAuril and ARMA the clusters are interesting lens through which to look at training data and membership. If other agencies use the clusters to analyse funding spread etc then collectively we may be able to identify different ways to incentivise KE practice at the institutional and individual level. But it is critical that clustering does not become a proxy for different 'leagues' of institutions who are then seeking to move up to the 'next' league.

#### **4. Perspectives and Metrics**

It is unclear how collaborative activities – such as that encouraged by the CCF or RPIF programmes – would be recognised within the perspectives. Given the current funding focus on collaboration between HEIs and with industry to drive KE we feel this aspect should be enhanced in the perspective metrics.

The point about 'place' in KE has been made above. The KEF doesn't reference the importance of place as identified in national and local Industrial Strategy policy and its relationship to funding such as Strength in Places, for example. Income from outside the UK is also absent from the resulting narrative and yet may be a strategic focus for an HEI.

Whilst the variety of KE activities captured are relevant the metrics being used does not represent the diversity in approach by institutions e.g. those that favour partnerships over IP ownership. There seems to be a focus on 'hard' commercialisation rather than recognition of partnership working where return on investment may have more commercial value for partners. The KEF currently does not explicitly capture wider forms of KE such as local innovation support to SMEs or KE through curricular and co-curricular activities e.g. the value of student projects which are valuable to students, universities and businesses and frequently lead on to other forms of KE. And because it is difficult to capture a 'customer journey' through metrics, that important aspect of good KE not presented in this exercise.

#### **a. Research partnerships**

See above point about collaboration: HE-BCI metrics only capture those research partnerships in receipt of external funding. Some disciplines – particularly in the Arts & Humanities – are not necessarily in receipt of government funding. The number and/or length of partnerships would be useful to capture and would introduce an element of customer satisfaction. These points possibly relate more to the HE-BCI review but are important to consider in the context of the KEF.

#### **b. Working with business**

This section describes a narrow body of business collaboration namely contract research and consultancy. The very definition of 'business' needs to be better understood in this perspective. A business – broadly defined – wanting to work with universities might look to the section on 'Working with Business' to answer the question about how good a university is at working with business but actually it's answering a much more precise question. We suggest that these sections should be called Contract Research and Consultancy with Business – and Contract Research and Consultancy with the Public and Third sector etc.

But we come back to the point that income is not necessarily proportional to impact and specifically selecting Innovate UK indicators is limited over a more overarching look at the breadth and depth of industrial partnerships (funded and unfunded). There's a broader suite of metrics that capture some of the KE delivered by institutions in TEF and REF that would be helpful to see signposted here. The impact that local innovation support can have on SMEs can be transformational for businesses' but wouldn't be captured using these metrics nor the ones proposed for local economic growth.

#### **c. Working with the public and third sector**

This metric is based on income in an area where income may not be a factor: number of contracts would be a more reliable measure of interaction in this case. It would be worth further segmentation to look at how we are engaging with the public and third sector and its impact.

See above for our comment on the narrow focus of the metrics in relation to the section title.

#### **d. Skills, enterprise and entrepreneurship**

Wider entrepreneurial business support offered by business incubation teams adds significant value to the entrepreneurial aspects of KE which will not be reflected in the current metrics. Furthermore, this is an area of KE where there is potentially overspill to activities of Careers Offices and Enterprise Teams, which may not be within the traditional purview of a KE office. Should Degree Apprenticeships fit under this metric, for example?

Members have also pointed out the investment that HEIs make in their own staff – particularly post-doctoral students – in equipping them for non-academic careers. On this point we also note interaction with the TEF and training / investment in graduate skills and entrepreneurship.

The relationship between LEPs and universities and local industrial strategy has no mention within this consultation. This is a critical aspect of the regional KE impact and should be captured. Skills would be a specific area to explore; this would be an area that the Careers and engagement teams in most universities contribute towards as part of a holistic approach to KE.

#### **e. IP and Commercialisation**

We welcome the shift to ratios to measure performance in this area, rather than the presentation of annual data points for single outcomes (such as number of patents). The metrics still focus on income rather than generation of IP and its treatment in different ways, however. The metrics do not reflect the wider partnerships and value driven from the use of IP including how the ownership of IP is proportioned e.g. shared, wholly owned, residing with partners and how partners have gone on to exploit IP themselves.

Income in this area is prone to spikes, which may be mitigated by using the three year average, but a picture of an HEI's IP portfolio or quantum of licensing activity is likely to be more useful to an external audience.

The HE-BCI will be important in exploring more suitable metrics that recognise activity, income and impact under this perspective. We would also like to see discussion with non-UK agencies to understand good practice in commercialisation metrics and thereby facilitating international benchmarking, which is particularly important for high-performing HEIs.

#### **f. Public and community engagement**

We consider that metrics identified in this perspective will be hard to capture (as they currently are for HEBCI Table 5) and that an alternative approach is needed to form an accurate picture of activity.

The current set of metrics do not illustrate institutional public engagement in a meaningful way, nor do they reflect the diversity of stakeholders engaged with and the value of this. Public engagement

is not only a way of disseminating research outcomes and activities in universities but also a way for the public/community to influence the sector, for universities to generate new ideas, make better (more informed) decisions and create greater trust in the use of tax payers' money. At a time when the public role of universities is being debated and polarised around tuition-fees this is an important area of the KEF to get right.

It would be useful to understand how PE feeds into more formal KE activities i.e. as part of a ladder of engagement as part of this narrative.

We also refer to the detailed response by the NCCPE on this point.

#### **g. Local growth and regeneration**

This is a complex area that deserves to be more three dimensional to provide an accurate picture of an HEI's local engagement and the funding available to it. Linking metrics to a narrative makes sense, therefore, but the metrics used to underpin the narrative need to be drawn from more diverse sources. The recent work of the Civic University Commission is worth referencing at this point.

These metrics do not demonstrate the specific impacts on local businesses supported which are often quite significant and can be transformational for both the local company and local economy. They currently exclude capital grant which is significantly important in local growth and regeneration, with institutions very often the critical delivery partner. It might be more helpful to look at expressing these metrics as £ gross 'value added'.

As with Skills, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship, the link to LEPs on this agenda should be further explored and recognised. The work of the Smart Specialisation Hub is relevant in this respect.

It would be helpful for this narrative (and the proposed metrics) to have more meaningful indicators which could easily be obtained such as number of new jobs created, company investment in R&D, new staff upskilled etc. Equally there would be value to looking at the breadth and depth of the relationships with these local companies to see how various university interventions not only leveraged change in a company have but also led on to other forms of business support such as KTP, Collaborative R&D, incubation, consultancy and contract research (the 'ladder of engagement').

The relationship between LEPs and universities has no mention within this consultation and is a critical aspect of the regional knowledge exchange impact and should be captured. With regards to local growth and regeneration Skills would be a specific area to explore.

#### **5. The role of further narrative or contextual information**

There should be an opportunity for an institution to state that they have a particular strategic objective for KE and that that may not include one or more of the measured perspectives. This

statement should reflect activities and objectives as part of a HEIF statement and Research England could provide an excerpt from that document for each HEI. There could also be an opportunity for the HEI to state its internal KE capacity and model for engagement e.g. size of team, stand-alone commercialisation office.

## **6. Visualisation**

The visualisations are somewhat helpful in terms of identifying quantity of activity but do not indicate quality. Visualisations are based on the quantitative metrics and do not take into account qualitative information – this is provided alongside rather being part of the scoring. The visualisations can therefore be misleading as a measure of quality knowledge exchange.

Neither do the visualisations indicate whether an HEI has a particular disciplinary or sector bias / strength in its KE: a link to an HEI's REF profile would be useful in this respect. Since research expertise in a particular domain is a key identifier for businesses the absence of this additional perspective makes the utility to non-HEIs questionable.

Whilst the decile approach is a step away from a simplistic ranking and may help visualisation, it flattens the profile of institutions: one cannot tell the 'distance' between deciles so one might have significant clustering of all institutions (within the margin of error of measurement) or a number of distinct clusters of relative performance. We are concerned that audiences will have difficulty understanding the message that decile presentation is trying to communicate.

## **7. Implementation**

The Pilot implementation exercise is welcomed, as was the decision to widen the pilot pool to 21 HEIs. The outcomes of the pilot exercise will be significant and should be shared widely with the sector and also discussed with stakeholders. Users of the KEF metrics dashboards should be incorporated into the pilot exercises so as to understand how they will use the visualisations and underlying data.

On the latter point, and as mentioned above, we consider that the HE-BCI review is far-reaching for the sector and of fundamental importance to the KEF. This review should be completed before the roll-out of the KEF so that HEIs can have more confidence in the shape of future iterations of the metrics exercise.

## **8. Any other comments**

Overall, the KEF does have the potential to raise the parity of esteem of Knowledge Exchange activities to more comparable level to those of Research and Teaching to maximise public investment in KE across the spectrum.

The KEF should inform work to raise standards in KE, share good practice and develop new models for engagement. The KEF exercise has raised the profile of KE and publication of data will increase

visibility to sector commentators and specialists. For the wider public, visibility comes in the shape of activity itself rather than through metrics and data.

Overall, it still feels that there is lack of clarity about who the KEF is for and how it can present complex interactions accurately to policymakers, university management, business audiences and other publics in a single tool. Specifically, the voice of the user is distinctly lacking in current discussion about the KEF and this needs to be captured if the exercise is to meet the second of its stated aims and provide universities with information on how KE performance can be improved.

Finally, as institutions consider the next REF and introduction of the TEF there has to be a better conversation about how these frameworks fit together and work for institutions, their employees and external customers and stakeholders. One very positive impact of KEF discussions to date has been the coming together of different groups to understand the reach and remit of KE within different types of HEI and how it reaches across research and teaching activities at the local, regional and international level. This conversation is welcomed and should be maintained.

End.

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