

HUBS Executive Committee Watching Briefs – November 2020

The HUBS Executive Committee have agreed that members of the committee would take on “Watching Briefs”. The aim of this initiative is to support Objective C2 in the HUBS Constitution:

“to enable input from the Heads and Subject Leads in the HE sector into policy formulation and responses for the Society and its Member Organisations”

The role of the brief holder is to:

- Take note of items of interest in the education policy update and science policy newsletter
- Subscribe to WonkHE, and keep up to date on developments
- Engage with relevant Royal Society of Biology staff member for their brief who will share relevant education policy updates, science policy newsletter and relevant consultation responses to inform the brief
- Consult with HUBS Executive Committee and wider HUBS members, if needed, to inform a HUBS viewpoint
- Engage with relevant consultation and inquiry responses, providing a HUBS view.

Consultation responses page for formal RSB positions and responses can be found at:

<https://www.rsb.org.uk/policy/consultations/consultation-responses>

HUBS members are encouraged to open dialogue directly with authors of briefs and copy all correspondence to consultation@rsb.org.uk

Briefs will be updated at regular intervals.

Contents

Watching Brief – Office for Students and Teaching Excellence Framework.....	1
Watching Brief – Research Excellence Framework (REF)	3
Watching Brief – The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)	6
Watching Brief – Scotland and Curriculum for Excellence	7
Watching Brief – International and Further Education	10

Watching Brief – Office for Students and Teaching Excellence Framework

Author contact details:

Professor Julian Park, University of Reading

HUBS Executive Committee

j.r.park@reading.ac.uk

Office for Students

The OFS continues to provide a wide-range of both information and support to both students and providers. Most providers have adopted some form of blended approach during the autumn term, which is continuing throughout the academic year in many institutions. The OFS website contains a special section which bring together materials related to the pandemic. However, the regulator has also been very active in recent weeks in reminding the sector of some of the challenges it will face going forward and this provides some insights into the foci of the OFS going forward. For instance, recent press briefings cover:

19/11: Grade inflation remains a significant and pressing issue despite the fact that “rate of increase” has slowed it still remains a substantive concern to the regulator

17/11: Consultation launched re tougher minimum standards in HE. Once the consultation is complete and responses reviewed the regulator intends to publish new and more challenging regulatory requirements to ensure all students [but particularly those from underrepresented groups] progress through to graduation and into graduate level work. Universities could be fined for poor quality courses etc.

5/11: There are widely-held concerns about student mental health, particularly in the context of the pandemic. The *Student Space* platform developed by the OFS to provide targeted online support to students by has now been extended through the whole academic year. Over 36k people had accessed it since it launch in August and it is seen as an important part of wider support around student mental health during this challenging year

4/11: The OFS reminds Universities that they must keep students well informed of teaching plans during the pandemic. It had also previously assured [8/10] students that it was closely monitoring the quality of online provision being offered by many universities

23/10: The interim evaluation of access and participation reforms were published. This is key aspect of the OFS work with a range of briefings and case studies available in relation to this. The report illustrates that Universities are having some success in both recruiting and supporting students in these groupings but there is clearly much more work to do in this area. A later report [4/11] noted that some of the most selective universities this year have taken 22% more students from the most under-represented communities and has [the OFS] urged Universities to ensure these students are appropriately supported.

This is just a flavor of the topics and publications covered by the OFS since the last brief. There are many other resources, events and information on the OFS website [\[https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/\]](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/) and interested parties can sign up for regular briefing which are an excellent way of keeping sight of the rapidly changing HE environment.

Teaching Excellence Framework

There appears to have been very little movement with TEF although the OFS has recently advertised for a Head of TEF post. The post is still open for those who may have the inclination to apply. The text below taken directly from the advert gives some insight into the future TEF.

“The Head of TEF will lead the development and delivery of the future Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) scheme, taking forward the outcomes of the forthcoming Independent Review of the TEF conducted by Dame Shirley Pearce. The TEF is a high-profile initiative intended to have widespread influence across the sector to improve the quality of teaching, learning and student outcomes. The successful candidate will be strategic and creative in managing both policy development and operational delivery of the TEF. The postholder will lead a team within the OfS, and work closely with other teams to ensure TEF forms a coherent part of the OfS’s overall approach to regulating quality, and reinforces our work to promote equality of opportunity in higher education. The role involves extensive engagement with the higher education sector, students and agencies across the UK to deliver a robust, credible and impactful initiative.”

In the update earlier in July this year it was noted that there would be no TEF5 in 2020 with the regulator giving consideration to 2021. It is still unclear how elements of the Pearce review will influence TEF going forward, and indeed the Pearce review itself is yet to be published.

Although there is a TEF Advisory Group, chaired by Chris Millward (Director of Fair Access and Participation) very little appears to have been forth-coming from this group to date, see

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/future-of-the-tef/tef-advisory-group/>

Watching Brief – Research Excellence Framework (REF)

Author contact details:

Professor Stephen Price, UCL

HUBS Executive Committee

stephen.price@ucl.ac.uk

Here, we summarise current information on two aspects of the REF, outputs and the Impact assessment.

All staff with a “significant responsibility for research” and being an independent researcher on the census date, currently of 31st July 2020 (see update below, this date unchanged owing to COVID-19 pandemic response), are counted to calculate the total number of outputs to be submitted by a given institution to a given unit of assessment (UoA). A code of practice must be put in place by a given institution to identify which of its staff fall within or outside this category. This code of practice must be drafted, consulted upon and sent to the REF team by March 2019. It has been noted that there is potential for industrial action to delay this process, which will be more straight forward for some institutions over others, where it might pose a considerable burden.

The number of submitted outputs is defined as a minimum of 1 per staff member with a significant responsibility for research and a maximum of 5 with an average of 2.5 per FTE within the department. However, this can be reduced to 0 for an individual staff member if there has been a demonstrable impact of personal circumstances during the REF period that resulted in no REF returnable outputs being available for submission.

Outputs are not portable but if an eligible former member of staff generated an eligible output before they left the institution then this may be submitted in the pool of outputs for that institution. The REF guidance on outputs have added some flexibility to the open access requirements for a given output to be eligible for submission. This includes the ability of an institution to submit 5% of its outputs that do not comply with the open access restrictions. Outputs will be judged based on their rigour, significance and originality and given a score of 1* to 4*. Impact factors of journals will not be used but citation data may be used by the UoA. Main panel A has stated that pedagogical research should be submitted to UoA23 (Education) and not to UoAs 1-6 which fall under its remit. HUMBS members may wish to note that this guidance differs to that of the other main panels.

Impact now more important- to 25% of the REF weighting. Number of impact case studies also changes. Minimum of 2 case studies for up to 15FTE submitted then 1

additional case study per 15FTE up to 105FTE then 1 additional case study for every 50FTE submitted (so a submission of 300FTE will require 12 impact case studies).

For Impact- the initial decisions document from September 2017 states:

“A key recommendation of the Stern review was to ensure the REF could better capture the multiple and diverse pathways and mechanisms through which impact arises from a body of work, and through which real benefits to the UK and wider world are delivered. This aim was widely supported by respondents to the consultation, and the funding bodies will seek to implement this in the exercise. Impacts will also be rated as 1* to 4* and the criteria for impact are of ‘reach and significance’.

- **Impact arising from public engagement.** This has been made more explicitly approved as an impact in and of its own and not just as a demonstration of impact of a wider impact case study.

The **guidance on submitting impacts on teaching are widened** to include impacts **within**, as well as beyond, the submitting institution. Guidance on demonstrating evidence against the criteria for this type of impact have been submitted. Main panel A states its expectation that evidence for impact will include quantitative data. Main panel B explicitly makes mention of both qualitative as well as quantitative measures to demonstrate impact.

a. Impacts will remain eligible for submission by the institution or institutions in which the associated research has been conducted.

b. Impacts should be underpinned by excellent research, with ‘excellent’ research continuing to mean the quality of the research is at least equivalent to two star.

c. The excellent research underpinning impact case studies must have been produced during the period from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020 across all UoAs. This will apply to all case studies, including examples continued or developed from REF 2014. The impacts described in case studies must have occurred within the period from 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020”

Main panel A- which includes most UoAs of relevance to HUBS members have stated explicitly that pedagogical research should be submitted to UoA23 (Education) and not to their UoAs (1-6). This is a key difference to Main panel B (which includes Chemistry and Physics) where pedagogical research will be accepted to those sub-panels. However, impact case studies could include the results of pedagogical research where impact can be demonstrated, particularly in cases where practice has changed in the sector as a result of the research.

RSB via HUBS and HUCMBS made two representations to the REF directorate that the treatment of main panel A UoAs was iniquitous in relation to the submission of pedagogical research. Unfortunately, both representations were rejected on the

grounds that the UoA subpanels did not have the necessary expertise to judge the quality of pedagogical research outputs and any such submissions would be cross referred to UoA23 (Education). Instead, it was suggested that submitting institutions could indicate their intention to submit pedagogical research to main panel A UoAs through a survey that closed in December 2019 in an attempt to influence the subpanel expertise composition. At the time of writing, it is not known whether the results of that survey of submission intentions has influenced the subpanel composition in main panel A.

As a result of the Spring 2020 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the REF2021 process was halted. A survey of stakeholders was conducted with a short deadline (5th May 2020) to ascertain the level of delay that was deemed appropriate. The survey asked for opinions on revised submission dates for staff and outputs and also extensions to the impact assessment period. Many HEIs considered a blanket extension of at least 12 months to all aspects of the process to be most appropriate. As a result of the consultation, a short extension was approved. Submissions to REF 2021 will be midday, 31 March 2021. This deadline will apply for all elements of submissions. With this revised timetable, the results are now expected in April 2022. Additionally, the impact assessment period has been universally extended and case studies may therefore describe specific examples of impact achieved in the period 1 August 2013 to 31 December 2020. The staff census date of 31 July 2020 remains unchanged.

Watching Brief – The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)

Author contact details:

Professor Hilary MacQueen, The Open University

HUBS Executive Committee

h.a.macqueen@open.ac.uk

The deadline for institutional submissions has passed (16th October 2020) and HEIs are now waiting for the outcomes. UKRI have stated that the outcomes of KEF will be announced in December 2020 (<https://re.ukri.org/knowledge-exchange/knowledge-exchange-framework/>), but there is every likelihood that this will slip.

Meanwhile HEIs are being invited to sign up to the KE Concordat <https://www.keconcordat.ac.uk/>. This is set to provide a mechanism by which universities can measure their performance across the whole range of KE activities and make a commitment to improving in those areas that are aligned with their particular mission. They say:

'The aim of this concordat is therefore to give universities and their staff and students clarity of mission and to support their development, give partners an accurate representation of the approach that individual universities are taking to KE, provide clear indicators of their approaches to performance improvement, and give our governing bodies and government broad confidence in the activity that is taking place in universities. It also aims to stress how collaboration between universities and partners in various aspects of KE can be beneficial to all participants.

Eight principles are suggested and HEIs are invited to sign up to the principles. There is a high-level implementation plan which represents the next stage of buy-in to the process. It is likely that many HEIs will delay sign-up until the results are out.

Watching Brief – Scotland and Curriculum for Excellence

Author contact details:

Professor Simon Guild, University of Glasgow

HUBS Executive Committee

simon.guild@glasgow.ac.uk

Higher Education

Free university tuition for EU students in Scotland ends.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-53354933>

The Scottish government is to end free university tuition for European Union students from next year. It said that following the Brexit vote, continuing with this policy would significantly increase a risk of any legal challenge. Higher Education Minister Richard Lochhead made the announcement in a statement to parliament. He said it was with a "heavy heart" that they were taking this decision from 2021/22. Figures suggest there are about 16,000 non-UK EU nationals enrolled in Scottish higher education. Under EU law, the free tuition policy for students based in Scotland meant that EU citizens who came to study needed to be treated the same. After the Brexit vote, ministers announced a continuation of the free tuition for EU citizens. However, with the Brexit transition period expiring at the end of December, the Scottish government has said it must end the scheme. EU students who have already started their studies, or who start this autumn, will not be affected and will still be tuition-free for the entirety of their course, the minister said. Mr Lochhead also said that the money which currently pays for EU student fees, up to £19m a year, will be kept in the higher education sector and should lead to an increase in the number of students from Scotland getting a place at university.

Covid in Scotland: Students and 'hotspot' areas targeted in testing.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-55101155>

Two new mass testing programmes for Covid-19 are under way in a bid to drive down infection rates before Christmas. Testing of Scotland's university students is beginning in an effort to make sure they are safe to return home. And residents in five coronavirus hotspots are being targeted as part of a trial mass testing programme. They include communities in areas of Glasgow, Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire and Renfrewshire. Experts say the community testing could cut the chain of transmission by identifying asymptomatic cases of coronavirus. The tests are being carried out in parts of Scotland where public health officials consider the numbers are "stubbornly high". First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said they would help inform decisions about expanding community testing "much more extensively" in the New Year. She added: "It's important to stress that any test will only tell you if you are positive at that point in time, when you are being tested - they will not necessarily show up if you are still incubating the virus. The testing of students is part of a separate programme

designed to minimise the spread of Covid-19 as many of them prepare to return home for Christmas. All students are being asked to take two rapid lateral flow device (LFD) tests before travelling. The tests should be taken three days apart and if they are both negative, they will be encouraged to go home as soon as possible. If either test is positive, the student will be asked to self-isolate. Positive cases should also take a more reliable PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test through NHS Test & Protect. It is thought about 80,000 students could be planning a trip home during the winter break.

Inconclusive Spending Review makes January budget critical for Scottish HE

<https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/inconclusive-spending-review-makes-january-budget-critical-for-scottish-he/>

The UK Government Spending Review announced on Wednesday (25 November 2020) has made January's Scottish Government budget a critical event for Scottish higher education. The Scottish block grant will increase by an additional £2.4bn in 2021/22 as a result of core and COVID-19 expenditure. Within UK Government spending priorities, an extra £400 million expenditure per year until 2023/24 was announced for research and development for the next three years [see notes]. Whilst the investment in research is welcomed by the sector, there was no new money assigned to the sector directly from the Treasury to help with issues caused by the pandemic and little clarity over the future funding arrangements at the end of the transition period out of the EU [see notes]. Scottish universities are facing financial insecurity that could be helped by the Scottish Government in January's budget. Universities are now facing uncertainty with no clarity about how much money will be coming to Scotland via either the investment in research or the Shared Prosperity Fund. Combined with doubt over the nature of the sector's relationship with the EU, the sector is looking to the Scottish Government to deliver the sector security and reassurance in the critical budget year of 2021/22.

Ahead of January's Scottish Government budget, universities are looking for:

- Sustainable funding of our core teaching, research and knowledge exchange contributions.
- Specific funding for additional actions to support an education and innovation-led recovery and help Scotland rebuild better.

Universities in Scotland currently face a tough set of circumstances which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The Scottish Government's budget for 2021/22 is the first strategic opportunity since the pandemic, to address the acute financial challenge faced by universities. Which are quantified as: The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) estimate that public funding of university teaching in 2018-19 was £157 million per year below the full cost of provision.

- In the same year research was funded at 80% of cost, a deficit of £340 million.
- The university sector's debt has increased from £437 million in 2014/15 to £1.65 billion at the end of 2018/19.
- SFC estimate that the sector will face an overall deficit of £176 million in 2020/21.

Schools

SNP pledge free school meals for all primary school pupils

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-55105158>

SNP pledge free school meals for all primary school pupils. The SNP has pledged to expand free school meals to all primary school pupils in Scotland. Deputy First Minister John Swinney said if the party retains power after the Holyrood elections in May, it would fund free breakfasts and lunches for all children in P1-P7. He told the SNP conference that the scheme would run in the school holidays - not just term time. Currently all pupils in P1 to P3 are entitled to free school lunches. The scheme is expected to cost £230m a year.

COVID-19 in Scotland: Will next year's Higher exams go ahead?

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-55149882>

Teachers, pupils and parents are waiting to find out if next year's Higher and Advanced Higher exams are going to be held next May. The Scottish government has already cancelled National 5s, the more junior exams, and originally said it planned to hold Highers in as normal a way as possible. However, the government has now said it is looking at the issue of disruption to education around self-isolation periods for Covid-19 and some key meetings are taking place this week that could help ministers make their decision.

John Swinney announced the cancellation of the National 5s in October. The education secretary made a statement to parliament in which he said holding a full exam diet in 2021 was "too big a risk" due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. National 5s will now be decided by "teacher judgement supported by assessment". Schools are still waiting for the full guidance on how to carry this out. The Scottish Qualifications Authority said plans were currently continuing in preparation for Higher and Advanced Higher exams starting on 10 May 2021. A spokesman added: "A clear contingency plan is being developed as part of the work being undertaken by the National Qualifications Group 2021, including key checkpoints up to the February break to assess public health advice and its impact on the plans for exams."

COVID-19 in Scotland: No extension to Scottish school Christmas holidays

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-55171623>

There will be no extension to Scotland's school Christmas holidays, the country's education secretary has confirmed. Talks had been held about potentially shutting all schools on 18 December and reopening them again on 11 January. But there had been concern about the impact on teaching time and the difficulties it could cause parents. The EIS, Scotland's largest teaching union, said the decision not to extend the holidays would anger many teachers. and it accused the government of "once again showing a complete disregard for the concerns and welfare of teachers". The union had wanted schools to move to remote learning in the final week of term to ensure senior staff did not find themselves having to deal with COVID-19 outbreaks during the holidays.

Watching Brief – International and Further Education

Author contact details:

Professor Debra Bevitt, Newcastle University

HUBS Executive Committee

debbie.bevitt@ncl.ac.uk

International

International students now eligible for UKRI grants

From the start of the 2021/22 academic year all UKRI studentships will be opened up to [international students](#). This includes EU and EAA students who will be classed as International students from academic year 2021/22. UKRI will normally cap the proportion of international students appointed each year through individual doctoral training programmes to 30% of the total awards.

Changes to International visas

October 2020 saw the opening of the [Student Route](#) which replaces the Tier 4 visa and aims to streamline the immigration process for international students. From summer 2021, the [Graduate Route](#) will allow international graduates to apply for post-graduate work experience: 2 years for those completing undergraduate and Masters degrees and 3 years for those completing PhDs. In October 2020 the UK government updated guidance to confirm that students who study online during 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic will still be eligible to apply for the Graduate Route if they arrive in the UK by 6th April 2021.

Times Higher Education World Rankings 2021

The [Times Higher Education World Rankings 2021](#) were released in September, with Oxford university ranked first for the fifth consecutive year and Tsinghua University in China becoming the first Asian university to enter the top 20. Analysis of [international student flows](#) confirmed China as the most important source of incoming students to the UK, followed by India and Germany.

Internationalisation and COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant restrictions on international mobility, both into and out of the UK. It is still too early for a clear picture of how many international students have registered for study in the UK in 2020-21, either present in the UK or online from their home country. [UCAS reported](#) in September that undergraduate acceptances from non-UK/EU students had risen by 9%, although EU acceptances fell by 2%. It is not yet clear what proportion of these acceptances converted to registrations. Furthermore, the UCAS figures do not include applications for postgraduate programmes. A [British Council survey](#), carried out between 6th August to 12th September, presented a still uncertain picture which varied by country: 28% of applicants from China reported that they were neither likely nor unlikely to change their plans for UK study, whereas 60% of applicants from India reported they were not at all likely to change their plans. This trend appears to be reflected in

recently published figures for [study visa applications](#), with visas granted to Chinese students more than halved and visas to Indian students rising by 50% compared to last year.

The picture for outward student mobility is also still emerging. A Universities UK International (UUKi) [flash poll](#) in June surveyed 62 institutions and reported a range of approaches to outward mobility for 2020-21. These included: postponement to semester 2; cancellation for semester 1; online in semester 1 with a view to travelling in semester 2; and virtual mobility/exchange.

The move to online and blended delivery of teaching in response to the pandemic is, however, offering some positive opportunities for internationalisation. Access to study abroad opportunities are typically biased towards an elite minority of students, and there is an urgent need to widen access to a more diverse cohort. The sustainability of international travel for study and research have also come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Innovative approaches to communicating and collaborating globally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic raise interesting possibilities for tackling some of these issues. Recent articles by [Ben Webster](#) and [Joyce Lau](#) also highlighted opportunities to reach out to marginalised students across the world, including refugees, through online teaching and local collaboration.

Further Education

Plans for 2021 A levels and Scottish higher exams

Following the significant disruption to teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic plans for the 2021 exams, including A levels and Scottish Highers are starting to emerge. At the time of writing the Department for Education has confirmed that A level exams will go ahead in [England](#), but with some modifications including advance notice of topics to be examined and contingency plans for students unable to sit the exams in the main exam period. On the other hand, it has been confirmed that there will be no A level exams in [Wales](#), with grades instead being determined by teacher-managed assessments. In [Scotland](#) National 5 exams (GCSE equivalents) have been cancelled, but decision on Highers is not expected until February 2021. No decision has yet been confirmed for [Northern Ireland](#), but so far it seems likely that exams will go ahead.

FE White paper due

An “exciting and bold” [FE White Paper](#) has been promised by Education secretary Gavin Williamson and is expected to be published by the end of 2020. Watch this space!

T-Levels launched

September 2020 saw the launch of the new [T-levels](#): these are 2-year courses which offer mix of classroom teaching and work experience during a 45-day industrial placement. The T-level has been assigned UCAS points equivalent to 3 A-levels. Three subjects are included in the initial launch (design, surveying and planning for construction; digital production, design and development; education and childcare) with a further 7 planned for September 2021, including Healthcare science and Science.

The College of the Future

In October 2020 the College commission published [The College of the Future](#) UK-wide final report, presenting eleven recommendations for reform and renewal of college systems by 2030. 3 key recommendations were: **Provide grants and loans that allow college students to live well whilst studying**; Establish a **new service through college employer hubs to tackle skills gaps**; **Overhaul, rebalance and integrate the whole post-16 education and skills system in each nation**