



EUROPE

# Guidance for standardising quantitative indicators of impact within REF case studies

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## Preface

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE),<sup>1</sup> on behalf of the four UK higher education funding bodies, asked RAND Europe to (i) identify quantitative indicators used as evidence of impact in the case studies submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014; and (ii) develop guidance for how these indicators could be standardised for potential use in REF 2021. This report articulates ways in which the use of quantitative indicators of impact can be standardised to contribute to the guidance for the preparation of impact case studies for REF 2021. A more standardised 'reporting structure' of quantitative impact indicators will increase the ease of conducting any post-REF analysis of the data. This would enable more detailed analyses of the data to demonstrate evidence of the impact of academic research in the UK to a broad range of stakeholders.

In particular, the report proposes guidance for two broad categories of standards. First, a 'style guide' is proposed containing general stylistic items that could be standardised in order to make quantitative indicators of impact – and specific formulations of them – more discoverable in general. Second, 'specific guidance' is presented which addresses more specific and commonly occurring quantitative indicators that have been used as evidence of impact in the REF 2014 case studies. It is important to note that this study does not judge the validity or relative value of the quantitative impact indicators presented in the REF 2014 case studies.

Both sets of guidance presented in this report are intended to inform the development of the guidance and criteria for the preparation of impact case studies in REF 2021. In addition, the analysis may be of interest to other stakeholders seeking to better understand how to articulate the impact of research and, more broadly, to anyone interested in research assessment, the REF, and the wider impact of university research.

The guidance presented in this report is primarily based on an analysis of the non-redacted impact case studies that were submitted by UK higher education institutions to REF 2014. The analysis was carried out over a nine-week period using a mixed-methods approach that involved a blend of text mining and qualitative methods.

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# Executive Summary

## Background and context

The Research Excellence Framework (REF), first conducted in 2014, is a system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). REF 2014 demonstrated that research conducted by universities can lead to impact beyond academia – for example, on society, the economy, public policy, and health – both for individuals and organisations, within the UK and beyond. In REF 2014, HEIs were invited to submit illustrations of impact as case studies. The combination of a compelling narrative to describe the impact, the underpinning research, and citations of evidence to corroborate the impact was seen as a ‘workable approach’ to describe these nuanced relationships (Manville et al. 2015). Accordingly, in REF 2021, impact will continue to be assessed through the use of case studies (REF 2017).<sup>3</sup>

## Aims of the study

In September 2017, a document was published outlining initial decisions taken on several aspects of REF 2021, including the impact element of the exercise (REF 2017). It was noted that guidance will be developed for standardising the use of quantitative data as evidence of impact within REF 2021 case studies. Against this backdrop, RAND Europe was commissioned by HEFCE,<sup>4</sup> on behalf of the four UK higher education funding bodies,<sup>5</sup> to (i) identify quantitative indicators of impact in the case studies submitted to REF 2014; and (ii) develop guidance for how these indicators could be standardised for potential use in REF 2021. A more standardised ‘reporting structure’ of quantitative impact indicators will increase the ease of conducting any post-REF analysis of the data. This would enable more detailed analyses of the data to demonstrate evidence of the impact of academic research in the UK to a broad range of stakeholders.

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3 Impact (specifically the impact template) will also be included in the environment element of the assessment (REF 2017).

4 HEFCE’s research and knowledge exchange staff and functions have now transferred to the newly created Research England. Research England is one of the nine councils of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

5 The four UK higher education funding bodies are Research England (formerly HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.

## Research approach

We adopted a mixed-methods approach to address the study objectives. This involved a blend of text mining and qualitative techniques. The study was conducted over a nine-week period through five main tasks, as follows:

- A rapid review of the literature to understand the different types of quantitative indicators that might be used in case studies to help inform our search of the REF 2014 case studies.
- Construction of a data set consisting of all sentences from the REF 2014 impact case studies that might contain quantitative indicators of impact<sup>6</sup> and analysis of this data set to identify different types of impact indicators and the variety of formulations used when describing them.
- An internal workshop to identify areas for potential standardisation and the corresponding standards themselves, both for particular quantitative indicators of impact, and those that would apply across indicators.
- Testing of the proposed guidance through a presentation and discussion with the REF Environment Working Group of the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics<sup>7</sup> and interviews with senior individuals working within the higher education sector.
- Synthesis of the evidence and reporting.

## Guidance for standardisation

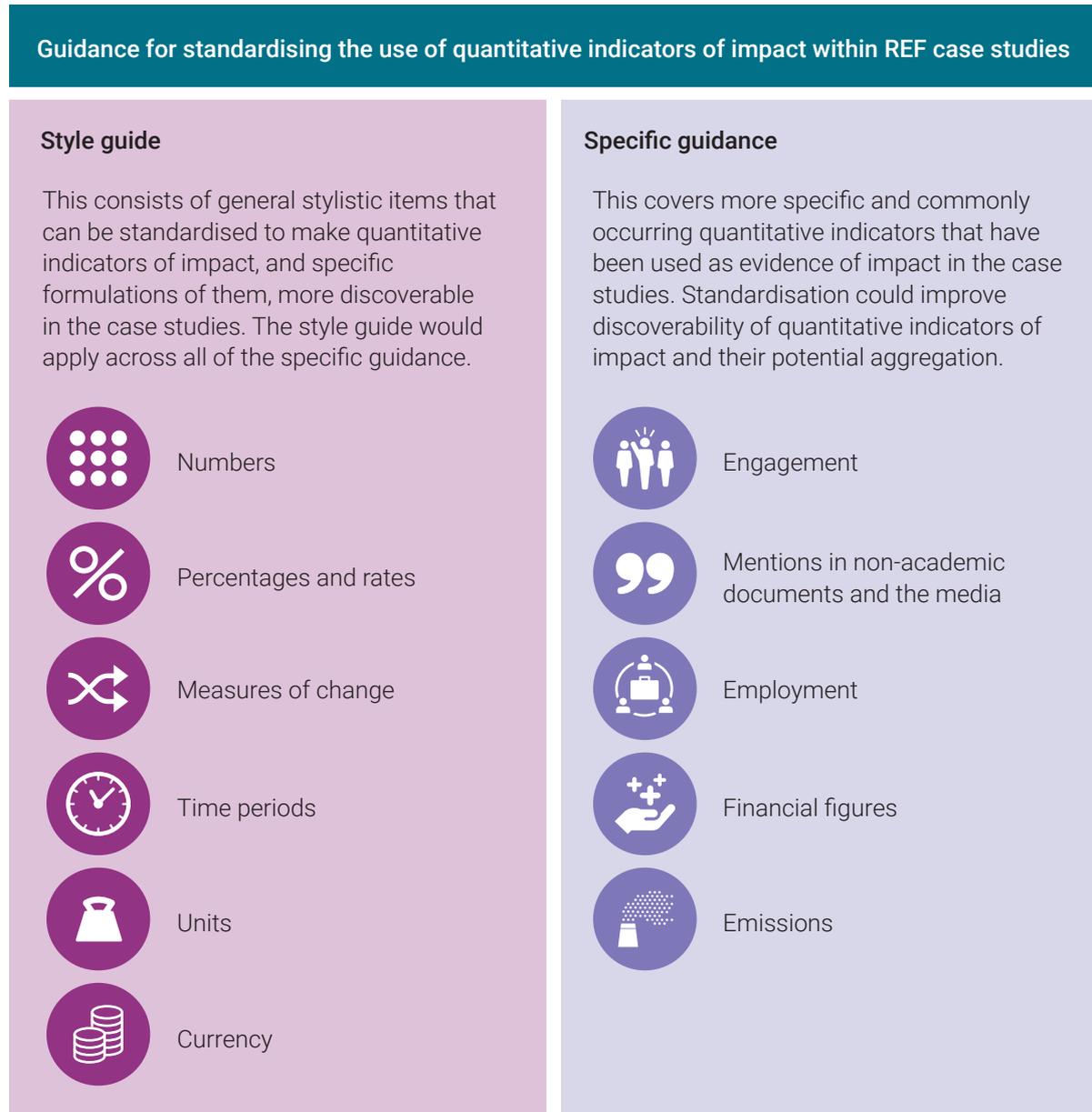
We propose guidance for two broad categories of standards. First, we outline a 'style guide' that contains general stylistic items that could be standardised in order to make quantitative indicators of impact, and specific formulations of them, more discoverable in the case studies in general. Second, we detail 'specific guidance' that addresses more specific and commonly occurring quantitative indicators that have been used as evidence of impact in the REF 2014 case studies. In Figure ES.1, we show a high-level illustration of these two categories of standards and the respective areas covered by the guidance. The guidance covered by the 'style guide' and the 'specific guidance' are discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3 of the report, respectively.

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6 To construct this data set, we downloaded the full text of the 'Details of Impact' sections of the case studies from the online impact case study database (HEFCE 2018). The data were downloaded on 8 January 2018.

7 The Forum for Responsible Research Metrics was set up in 2016 as a 'group of research funders, sector bodies and infrastructure experts [...] working in partnership to promote the responsible use of research metrics' across the UK research community (HEFCE 2016).

**Figure ES.1 The two categories of standards proposed and the respective areas covered by the guidance**



Source: RAND Europe analysis

## Concluding remarks

Both sets of guidance presented in this report are intended to inform the development of the guidance and criteria for the preparation of impact case studies in REF 2021. Providing a more standardised case study 'vocabulary' for quantitative impact indicators will potentially facilitate a more effective and efficient (text-mining-based) analysis of these data across the corpus of case

studies that are submitted by UK HEIs in REF 2021 (e.g. in terms of making certain quantitative indicators of impact more easily discoverable). This would permit more efficient and detailed analyses of the data to demonstrate evidence of the wider impact of academic research in the UK.

It is important to bear in mind that this study does not judge the validity or relative value of the quantitative impact indicators presented in the REF 2014 case studies. Furthermore, the guidance we have proposed is not intended to be a comprehensive or definitive list of topics. When developing impact case studies for REF 2021, these standards should not be treated as exacting requirements or restrictions on what can be written per se. We recognise that the standards might not work in all instances and could, at times, result in the case study vocabulary becoming somewhat unwieldy. Finally, while the guidance helps to make quantitative indicators more discoverable within case studies, quantitative indicators should be used responsibly, taking into account the context as well as the numerical value, in line with the principles of use of metrics outlined in *The Metric Tide* (Wilsdon et al. 2015).

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## List of abbreviations and acronyms

CO <sub>2</sub>	carbon dioxide
FTE	full-time equivalent
GBP	United Kingdom pound sterling
GVA	gross value added
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	higher education institution
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
QALY	quality-adjusted life year
REF	Research Excellence Framework
ROI	return on investment
SI	International System of Units (from <i>Système International d'Unités</i> )
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
UOA	unit of assessment

## Acknowledgements

We have been able to carry out this study because of the support of a number of individuals. First, we would like to thank HEFCE, in particular Catriona Firth, Kim Hackett, Geoff Hill and Steven Hill, for their helpful advice and guidance throughout the project. We would also like to acknowledge the useful insights and feedback provided by members of the REF Environment Working Group of the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics. They helped to 'stress test' many of our findings. We are grateful to the following individuals who gave us their time and kindly agreed to be consulted as part of this study: Maria Delgado (The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London), Elizabeth Gadd (Loughborough University), Anna Grey (University of York), Jon Freeman (RAND Europe), Jon Sussex (RAND Europe), Ludo Waltman (Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS), Leiden University), and Evelyn Welch (King's College London). We particularly appreciate the valuable input and support provided by our Quality Assurance reviewers at RAND Europe, Dr Advait Deshpande and Dr Susan Guthrie. In addition, we would like to thank Jessica Plumridge (RAND Europe) for helping to lay out the report. Finally, we would like to thank Suzanne Needs for copy-editing the report.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1. Study context

The Research Excellence Framework (REF), first conducted in 2014, is a system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). REF 2014 demonstrated that research conducted by universities can lead to impact beyond academia – for example, on society, the economy, public policy, and health – both for individuals and organisations, within the UK and beyond. The benefits of assessing wider impact can be usefully summarised around four ‘A’s’, namely, accountability, advocacy, analysis and allocation (Morgan Jones & Grant 2013). Assessing impact provides evidence that academic research should continue to be funded and is directly benefitting the taxpayers who fund it. Once impacts are captured, they can be further analysed to discover best practice and efficiencies in research funding.

In REF 2014, HEIs were asked to submit illustrations of impact as case studies. The combination of a compelling narrative to describe the impact, the underpinning research, and citations of evidence to corroborate the impact was seen as a ‘workable approach’ to describe these nuanced relationships (Manville et al. 2015). Accordingly, in REF 2021, impact will continue to be assessed through the use of case studies (REF 2017).<sup>8</sup>

The case study exercise in REF 2014 also provided an opportunity for a preliminary assessment of the overall impact of UK HEIs’ research. Following REF 2014, a text-mining analysis was carried out on the body of impact case studies (King’s College London and Digital Science 2015). The study demonstrated that there were about 70,000 instances of quantitative data (excluding dates) mentioned in the impact case studies.<sup>9</sup> However, analyses across the case studies were challenging because data were not presented in a systematic or standardised format. Measurements were described using a variety of units (such as different currencies), and not all uses of quantitative information were related to impact (such as reporting on the size of a population with a disease), thus making return-on-investment-type estimates (for example) via text mining unfeasible (King’s College London and Digital Science 2015).

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8 Impact (specifically the impact template) will also be included in the environment element of the assessment (REF 2017).

9 A searchable online database was created following REF 2014 to make the impact case studies publicly available (HEFCE 2018).

In September 2017, HEFCE,<sup>10</sup> on behalf of the four UK higher education funding bodies,<sup>11</sup> published a document outlining initial decisions taken on various high-level aspects of REF 2021, including the impact element of the exercise (REF 2017). The document noted that guidelines would be developed for standardising the use of quantitative data as evidence of impact within REF 2021 case studies. A more standardised 'reporting structure' of quantitative impact indicators could increase the ease of conducting any post-REF analysis of the data (e.g. in terms of aggregating quantitative information across case studies). This would enable demonstration of evidence of the impact of academic research in the UK to a broad range of stakeholders.

## 1.2. Aims and scope of the study

This study, commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of the four UK higher education funding bodies, had two specific aims:

- To identify quantitative indicators used as evidence of impact in the case studies submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014; and
- To develop guidance for how these indicators could be standardised for potential use in REF 2021.

The guidance presented in this report is intended to inform the development of the guidance and criteria for the preparation of impact case studies in REF 2021. However, the analysis may also be of interest to other stakeholders associated with the higher education sector seeking to better understand how to articulate the impact of research and, more broadly, to anyone interested in research assessment, the REF, and the wider impact of research beyond academia.

We focus on a specific subset of quantitative indicators of impact used in the REF 2014 case studies. However, it is important to note that the study does not judge the validity or relative value of these quantitative impact indicators. In addition, the study does not attempt to propose standards for the use of qualitative data related to impact.

## 1.3. Overview of research approach

The study was conducted over a nine-week period through five primary tasks, as illustrated in Figure 1.1. We adopted a mixed-methods approach that involved a blend of text mining and qualitative techniques. The main tasks involved in the work were:

- A rapid review of the literature to develop an understanding of the kinds of quantitative indicators that might be used in impact case studies to inform our search of the REF 2014 case studies.
- Construction of a data set containing all sentences from the REF 2014 impact case studies that might contain quantitative indicators of impact and analysis of this data set using a mix

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10 HEFCE's research and knowledge exchange staff and functions have now transferred to the newly created Research England. Research England is one of the nine councils of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

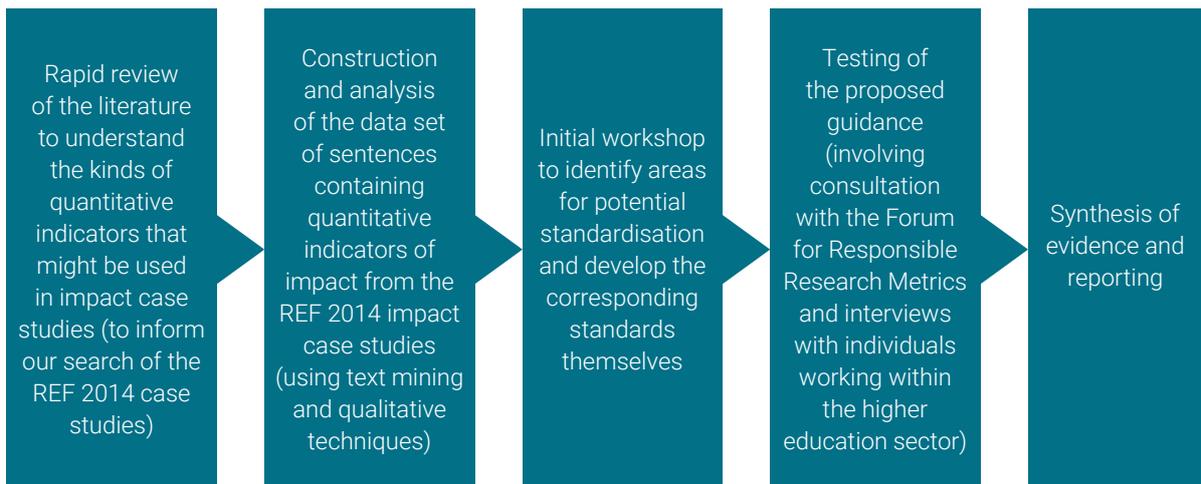
11 The four UK higher education funding bodies are Research England (formerly HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.

of text mining and qualitative techniques to identify different types of impact indicators and the variety of formulations used when describing them.

- An internal workshop to identify areas for potential standardisation and the corresponding standards themselves, both for particular quantitative indicators of impact, and those that would apply across indicators.
- Testing of the proposed guidance through a presentation and discussion with the REF Environment Working Group of the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics<sup>12</sup> and interviews with senior individuals working within the higher education sector.
- Synthesis of the evidence and reporting.

Further details on the methodology are provided in Annex A. We note the main limitations of the analysis in the next section. This is followed by a discussion of the analysis, in particular the highlighting of some of the main aspects associated with the research process that have enabled us to develop guidance to standardise quantitative impact indicators.

**Figure 1.1 Schema illustrating the research approach**



Source: RAND Europe representation

12 The Forum for Responsible Research Metrics was set up in 2016 as a 'group of research funders, sector bodies and infrastructure experts [...] working in partnership to promote the responsible use of research metrics' across the UK research community (HEFCE 2016).

## 1.4. Limitations of the approach

There are some important caveats to our approach that should be borne in mind when interpreting the analysis presented in this report. First, the study is not intended to define what impact is, nor how it should be evidenced. We focus exclusively on quantitative indicators that were used as evidence of impact in the case studies submitted to REF 2014, and we do not propose standards for the use of qualitative data related to impact. Furthermore, the analysis is based on quantitative indicators of impact that have been written out in numerical format in the case studies; impact indicators that have been written out in words but which could imply quantitative impact in terms of reach and/or significance are not captured in our analysis (e.g. 'seven schools'; 'all countries in Europe').

The guidance that we have developed is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. It does not cover all possible types of quantitative indicators of impact; the areas of standardisation and the corresponding standards are primarily based on the most commonly occurring quantitative impact indicators identified across the non-redacted REF 2014 case studies. The research approach had to be designed and implemented within a very short period of time (nine weeks). We relied on a mix of text mining and qualitative techniques to identify and analyse sentences containing quantitative impact indicators. By necessity, during the analysis phase, we manually examined a subset of these sentences. With more time available, we would have been able to inspect more sentences and therefore, potentially, propose additional areas for standardisation. However, we mitigated against 'missing' important standardisation topics to some extent by testing the proposed standards through consultation and interviews with experts.

Finally, even when using the proposed guidance, there may still be challenges in identifying impact-related data, as some of the data may relate to context instead of evidence of impact. For example, a sentence containing sales data could either describe a particular market (e.g. 'porridge sales are £40 million putting the UK market for hot oat cereals at over £160 million') or directly refer to the money made from sales due to a particular product impacted on by the underpinning research (e.g. 'this amounts to more than \$137million in sales for Medtronic since 2008').

## 1.5. Analysis

This section describes some of the key aspects related to the process involved in carrying out the analysis. Where appropriate, we have highlighted the main results associated with the analysis that have helped to inform the development of the proposed standards.

A schematic diagram illustrating the main steps involved in constructing and analysing the data set is shown in Figure 1.2 (more detailed information on the methods involved in this process is provided in Annex A). To construct a data set of sentences containing quantitative indicators of impact, we downloaded the full text of the 'Details of Impact' sections of the case studies from the online impact case study database.<sup>13</sup> We extracted all of the sentences with numbers in them,

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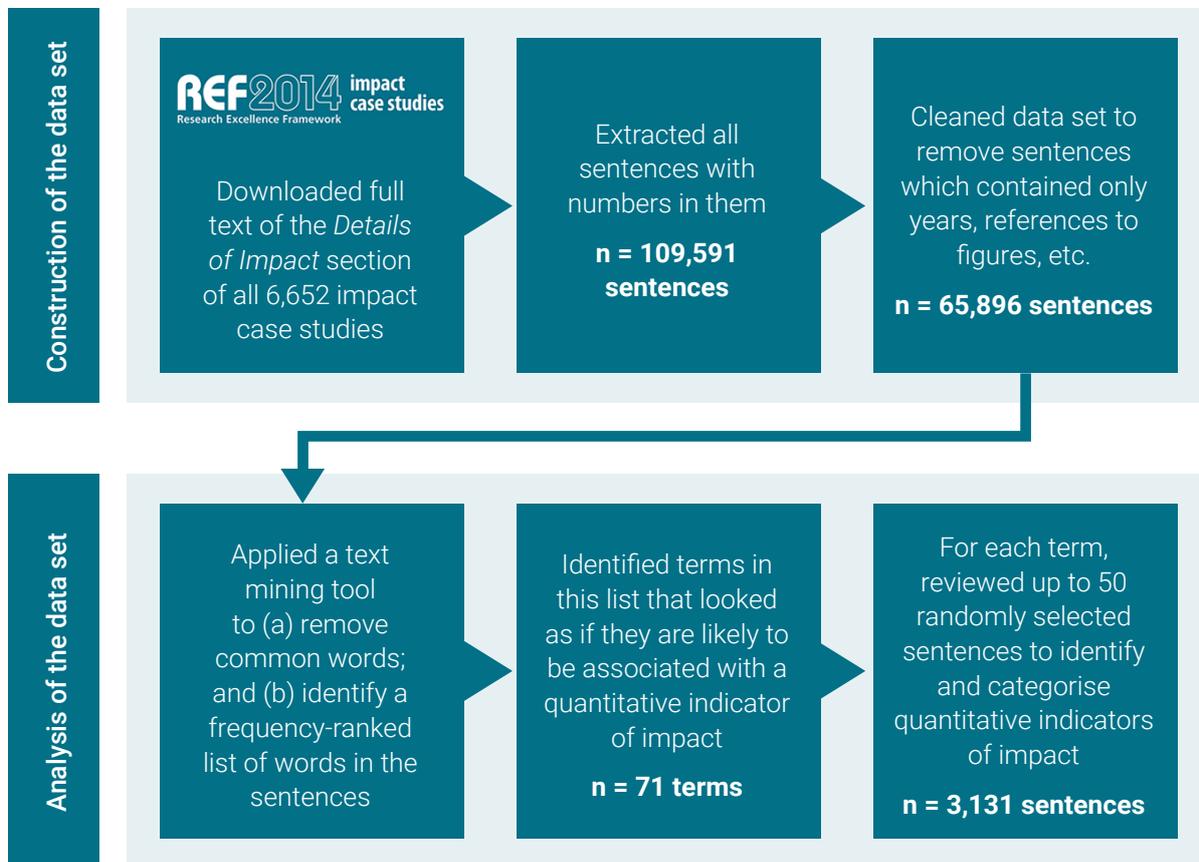
13

The data were downloaded from the impact case study database (HEFCE 2018) on 8 January 2018.

and we then removed extraneous sentences that contained (for example) only years, references to figures, etc.<sup>14</sup>

To analyse the data set, we used a text-mining tool to identify a frequency-ranked list of the most common words in sentences (having removed very common words, such as 'and', 'to' and 'for'). We then manually identified terms within this list that either (i) looked as if they could be associated with a quantitative indicator of impact (e.g. 'used', 'people', 'increased' and 'visited'), or (ii) were terms associated with categories of indicators identified in the literature review (such as 'QALY', 'CO<sub>2</sub>' or 'GVA'). For each term, we reviewed up to 50 randomly selected sentences to identify and categorise quantitative indicators of impact.

**Figure 1.2 Schema illustrating steps involved in constructing and analysing the data set**



Source: RAND Europe representation

Once the quantitative indicators of impact had been categorised, we reviewed the examples within each category to identify areas for standardisation both within and across the categories.

14 Sentence extraction and cleaning was carried out using R, a statistical software package. More details on the methods used and the number of sentences extracted are provided in Annex A.

We used a specific set of criteria to select the areas of standardisation and to develop the standards themselves (Table 1.1).

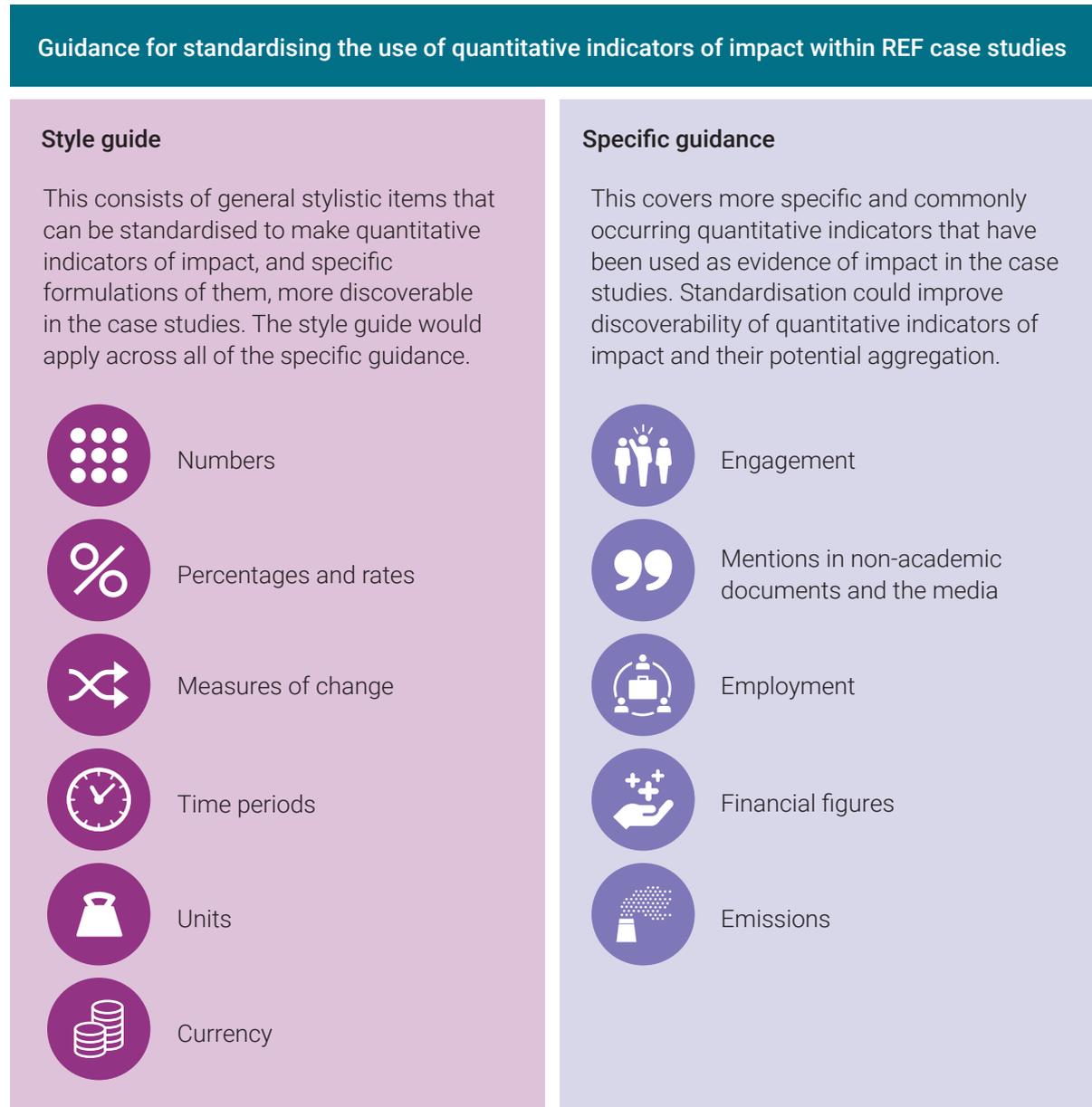
**Table 1.1 Rationale for standardisation**

<b>Criteria for selecting the areas of standardisation (i.e. the types of indicators to be standardised)</b>
Frequently occurs in the impact case study sentences examined
Is an area of anticipated post-REF analysis
Is an area where standardisation would improve the ease of analysis
<b>Criteria for selecting the standards for these indicators</b>
Is one of the most commonly used formulations across the impact case studies
Aligns with existing standards (based on evidence in the literature), with a focus on the UK context if relevant
Does not place an undue burden on impact case study authors
Facilitates post-REF analysis while not significantly affecting the narrative nature of the impact case studies

Source: *RAND Europe analysis*

Finally, we tested the proposed guidance through a presentation and discussion with the REF Environment Working Group of the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics and interviews with senior individuals working within the higher education sector. Key points raised during these consultations are discussed in Annex A.4. On the basis of our analysis, we have proposed guidance for two broad categories of standards. In Figure 1.3, we show a high-level illustration of these two categories of standards and the respective areas covered by the guidance. First, we have developed a 'style guide' that contains stylistic items that could be standardised to make quantitative indicators of impact – and specific formulations of them – more discoverable across the case studies in general. Second, we have proposed some 'specific guidance' that addresses more specific and commonly occurring quantitative indicators that have been used as evidence of impact in the case studies. Table 1.2 sets out the key rationales for selecting the areas of standardisation and the specific standards themselves. The guidance for these two categories of standards (comprising the areas for standardisation and the corresponding standards themselves) are described in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

**Figure 1.3 The two categories of standards proposed and the respective areas covered by the guidance**



Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table 1.2 Key rationales used for selecting the areas of standardisation and developing the standards themselves**

		Style guide						Specific guidance				
		Numbers	Percentages and rates	Measures of change	Time periods	Units	Currency	Engagement	Mentions in non-academic documents and the media	Employment	Financial figures	Emissions
Criteria for selecting the areas of standardisation (i.e. the types of indicators to be standardised)	Frequently occurs in the impact case study sentences examined	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Is an area of anticipated post-REF analysis						✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Is an area where standardisation would improve the ease of analysis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criteria for selecting the standards for these indicators	Is one of the most commonly used formulations across the impact case studies	✓	✓			✓						✓
	Aligns with existing standards (based on the evidence in the literature), with a focus on the UK context if relevant					✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
	Does not place an undue burden on impact case study authors	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Facilitates post-REF analysis while not significantly affecting the narrative nature of the impact case studies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: RAND Europe analysis

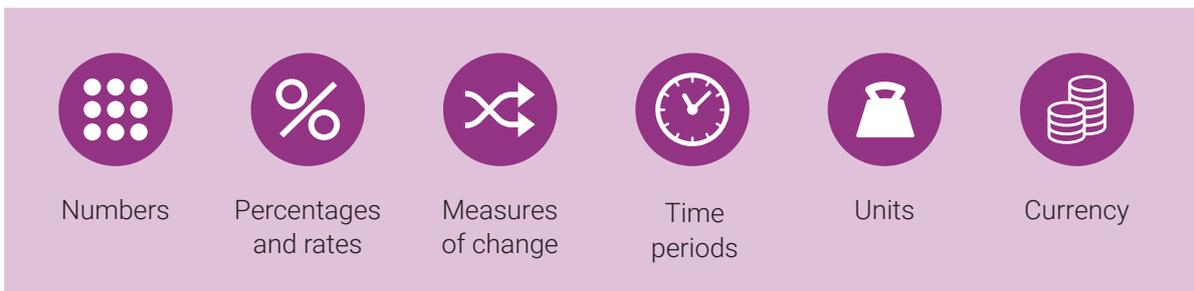
## 1.6. Structure of this report

The report is structured as follows: In Chapter 2, we present detailed information on the ‘style guide’ and Chapter 3 describes the ‘specific guidance’. In both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, we provide descriptions about the areas of standardisation identified, as well as specific information about the proposed standards. We finish the report in Chapter 4 with some concluding reflections. The annex provides supplementary information, including more detailed information on the methodology and analysis (Annex A).

## 2 Using a 'style guide' to standardise quantitative indicators of impact

As noted in Chapter 1, the study proposes guidance for two broad categories of standards. The first standardisation category is a 'style guide', which pertains to the way numerical data are written or presented in the impact case studies. The style guide consists of general stylistic items that can be standardised in order to make numerical indicators of impact – and specific formulations of these indicators – more discoverable in the case studies. It is envisaged that the style guide would apply across all the 'specific guidance' (which is discussed in Chapter 3). The style guide can be regarded as general guidance to facilitate a more standardised means of representing several items that are commonly used in conjunction with quantitative indicators of impact across the case studies. It is intended to be used where feasible, and not to set restrictions or requirements on what can be presented in the impact case studies. The style guide specifically covers the use of six areas as highlighted in the box below.

### Box 1 Areas of standardisation covered by the 'style guide'



Source: RAND Europe analysis

Each of these areas is discussed in turn below. We provide a short description about each area followed by the suggested approach to standardisation along with examples of use where appropriate. As noted in Chapter 1 (Table 1.2), we used a set of criteria (i.e. rationale) to select the six areas of standardisation covered by the style guide and to develop the standards themselves. In Annex A (Table A.11), we provide some more specific details related to the rationale for selected areas of the proposed guidance.



## 2.1. Numbers

### Description

Within the case studies, numbers are presented in a range of ways. They are written out numerically and as words (e.g. '4' and 'four'). For some numbers, there is wide variation in the way the number is represented (e.g. million is written as: '1,000,000', '1million', '1mil', '1m', and '1M')

There are a number of cases where approximate or estimated figures are used, using a range of terms to illustrate the lack of precision in the figure (e.g. 'use of ca 16200 mice', 'approximately 1000 tonnes', 'webmaster figures estimate c.25000 downloads', 'GVA of about £35.5 billion', 'circulation of roughly 600000 readers', 'audiences of around 250', 'provided funding in the region of £115000').<sup>15</sup>

### Guidance for standardisation

- Use numerals when referring to quantitative indicators of impact (e.g. '4', '1,567', '2,000,000').
- Use commas for the thousands separator in numbers of 4 digits or more (e.g. '1,567', '2,000,000').
- Use precise figures where possible. If referring to a non-exact figure, use 'approximately [X]' (e.g. 'approximately 100 people', 'approximately GBP1,000,000').
- If decimal points are necessary, use 2 decimal points where possible (e.g. '0.29', '8.50', '2,000.88').<sup>16</sup>

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15 Within the case studies, there are also a range of phrases used to describe approximate figures, which indicate uncertainty but in a certain direction, e.g. 'nearly 2,000 downloads', 'at least 310 visitors'. Due to the range of phrases, we are not suggesting standards for these.

16 There are instances, however, where it might be more appropriate to use more than two decimal points, e.g. 0.004m (i.e. 4mm).



## 2.2. Percentages and rates

### Description

Percentages are often used to indicate the significance of impact. The proportion is written variably as: 'the percentage is', 'X percent', 'X per cent', 'X %'.

Specific types of rate are often reported within case studies. Some of the most common types include: mortality rate, survival rate, response rate, and success rate. While some case studies explicitly use the term 'rate' (e.g. 'mortality rate'), others imply rates without using the term (e.g. only using the term 'mortality').

### Guidance for standardisation

- Use % immediately after the numerical value (e.g. '17%', 29.18%).
- Do not include a space between the numerical portion and %.
- If describing a particular type of rate, include the term 'rate' (e.g. 'mortality rate', 'survival rate', 'response rate').



## 2.3. Measures of change

### Description

A number of case studies demonstrate impact by indicating the increase or decrease in a certain quantity or rate. These sentences are formulated in a variety of ways (e.g. 'the study showed a 19% reduction in vehicles and a 19% reduction in miles driven', 'this represents an additional 7 months of survival in full health', 'the numbers of HN students progressing to degrees have increased from 2761 in 2006/07 to 3857 in 2011/12', 'had resulted in a 33% lower average indoor radon concentration in new homes', 'This resulted in a 20 per cent increase in the legislated minimum wage for 21-year-olds', 'between 2010 and 2012 donepezil use increased by 41%').

### Guidance for standardisation

- Use the following formulations as appropriate:
  - '...increase(s/d) from [X] to [Y]...' (e.g. 'increases from 5 to 6 months of survival')
  - '...increase of [X] ...' (e.g. 'increase of 70% per year')
  - '...decrease(s/d) from [X] to [Y]...' (e.g. 'decreased from 25% to 7% since 2014')
  - '...decrease of [X] ...' (e.g. 'decrease of 20mtCO<sub>2</sub>e')



## 2.4. Time periods

### Description

A range of time periods are used in the case studies, spanning from hourly to yearly, to longer periods. In addition, the time periods are described in a variety of different ways (e.g. 'in the last 5 years', 'since 2008', 'in the REF impact period', 'from 2007 to 2013', 'as at May 2013', 'throughout the period 2008-13', 'over a twelve month period', 'per month', 'per annum', 'pa', 'between Q3-2008 and Q2-2011', 'over the following two weeks', 'recently', 'soon').

### Guidance for standardisation

- Use the following formulations as appropriate:
  - '... per [TIME PERIOD] ...' (e.g. 'per day', 'per month')
  - '... between [X] and [Y] ...' (e.g. 'between May and June 2013', 'between 2013 and 2017')
  - '... since [X] ...' (e.g. 'since 2012', 'since 18 August 2017')
- Include the year where appropriate.



## 2.5. Units

### Description

A range of metric and imperial units are used within the case studies (e.g. 'gram', 'g', 'pound', 'lb', 'tonne', 'ton', 't', 'mile', 'mi', 'km', 'kilometre', 'metre', 'cm', 'ha', 'hectare', 'millilitres', 'ml', 'litres', 'liters', 'L').

### Guidance for standardisation

- Where possible, to express the values of quantities, use SI units,<sup>17</sup> or non-SI units that are accepted for use with the International System of Units.
- When used with a numerical value, position the value before the appropriate symbol (e.g. '10km', '50t').
  - For weight, use, for example, the following symbols: g (for gram), kg (for kilogram), t (for tonne)
  - For distance, use, for example, the following symbols: mm (for millimetre), cm (for centimetre), m (for metre), km (for kilometre)
  - For volume, use, for example, the following symbol: ml (for millilitre), l (for litre)
  - For area, use, for example, the following symbol: ha (for hectare)
- Do not include a space between the numerical portion of the measurement and the symbol.

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SI stands for the International System of Units (the acronym incorporates the first part of the original French name, *Système International d'Unités*). Further information about SI units is available online (NPL 2018).



## 2.6. Currency

### Description

A range of currencies are used throughout the case studies, including variations in notations (e.g. '£', 'GBP', 'pounds', '€', 'EUR', 'Euro', '\$', 'USD', 'dollars', 'A\$', 'AU\$', 'DKK', and 'Yen').

### Guidance for standardisation

- Where currency is described, use the three-letter alphabetic currency code as specified in the ISO standard, ISO 4217:2015 (e.g. GBP, EUR, USD, AUD).<sup>18</sup>
- Do not include a space between the currency code and the number (e.g. 'GBP100', 'GBP8,170.48').
- Use GBP as the standard currency.
- If a currency other than GBP is used, provide the month and year in which the original figure was calculated in parentheses following the figure, using the format MM-YYYY (e.g. 'has contributed approximately USD19,000,000 (08-2013) gross value-added (GVA) to the region in shareholder return salaries and infrastructure spend').

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ISO is the short form used for the International Organization for Standardization. The list of currency codes can be accessed from the ISO website (ISO 2015).

## 3 Using 'specific guidance' to standardise quantitative indicators of impact

In addition to the 'style guide' we have identified a second category of topics or areas for standardisation. These topics cover more specific and commonly occurring quantitative indicators that have been used as evidence of impact in the case studies. The standardisation of these topics could improve discoverability of quantitative indicators of impact within the case studies (e.g. by reducing the number of synonymous terms used) as well as their potential aggregation. They are intended to be used where feasible in the impact case studies, and not to set restrictions on what can be presented. Depending on the context and usage within the impact case studies, the 'style guide' standards could apply across this specific guidance. In particular, the specific guidance covers the use of five areas associated with quantitative indicators of impact as listed in the box below.

### Box 2 Areas of standardisation covered by the 'specific guidance'



Source: RAND Europe analysis

Each of these areas is discussed in turn below. For every area, we provide a concise explanation about the indicator followed by the suggested approach to standardising the quantitative indicator. Where relevant, we also include examples of use. As mentioned in Chapter 1 (Table 1.2), we used a set of criteria (i.e. rationale) to select these specific areas of standardisation and to develop the standards themselves. In Annex A (Table A.11), we provide more specific details related to the rationale for selected areas of the proposed guidance.



## 3.1. Engagement

### Description

In the case studies, researchers frequently provided a measure of the number of people they engaged with through various activities. There are a range of phrases used to describe these individuals, from more specific terms (e.g. 'parents', 'children', 'students', 'residents', 'implant users', 'staff', 'teacher trainers', 'workers'), to more general terms (e.g. 'people', 'visitors', 'individuals', 'users', 'attendees', 'listeners', 'spectators', 'audience').<sup>19</sup>

### Guidance for standardisation

- Use specific terms where appropriate (e.g. 'parents', 'children', 'students').
- Use the formulation '... [X] people ([SPECIFIC INFORMATION]) ...' (e.g. 'viewed by 50 people (children aged 10 to 15 and their school teachers)', 'attended by approximately 2,500 people (junior doctors)').

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There are also a number of references to numbers of 'organisations', e.g. 'schools', 'businesses', 'hospitals'. Due to the variety of types and differing nature, we are not suggesting any guidance for standardising these.



### 3.2. Mentions in non-academic documents and the media

#### Description

Across a number of case studies, numerical impact information is presented to signify the number of mentions or references of the underpinning research in non-academic documents and the media (including, for example, guidelines, policy documents, court judgements, case documents, strategy documents, magazines, newspapers). A range of synonymous terms were used to indicate citations in non-academic documents/the media (e.g. 'cited by', 'cited in', 'cited', 'cited at', 'mentioned', 'used in', 'featured').

In addition to mentions in non-academic documents and the media, impact case studies also included information on the circulation and readership of the publication.

#### Guidance for standardisation

- For mentions of non-academic documents, use: '... cited [X] times in ...' (e.g. 'cited 50 times in national policy documents').<sup>20</sup>
- For mentions of the media (print and online), use: '... referenced [X] times in ...' (e.g. 'referenced 50 times in the media across 10 countries').
- When a specific publication is mentioned, where available, provide relevant readership and circulation figures from an appropriate date<sup>21</sup> (e.g. 'the Guardian (print readership: 867,000; circulation: 152,714)').

20 Raw citation counts should be treated with caution, taking into account that different fields have different distributions of citation.

21 Circulation is 'a count of how many copies of a particular publication are distributed', and readership is 'an estimate of how many readers a publication has' (National Readership Survey 2018).



### 3.3. Employment

#### Description

Case studies provided evidence of economic impact by citing the number of jobs created or the number of employees. There were a variety of synonymous terms and sentence structures used to quantify the number of people impacted by job creation (e.g. 'employs a total of 19 staff', 'generated 250 jobs', 'provided employment for high quality chemists (>60 FTE)').

#### Guidance for standardisation

- When referring to increasing employment as an outcome of research, where possible include both the headcount and the number of FTEs (where FTE is full-time equivalent) (e.g. 'generated 10 jobs (headcount: 10; FTEs: 10)', 'this created 50 part-time jobs (headcount: 50; FTEs: 25)').



### 3.4. Financial figures

#### Description

A range of financial indicator-related terms were used within the case studies (e.g. 'value', 'sales', 'revenue', 'turnover', 'cost savings', 'profit', 'return on investment (ROI)', 'gross value added (GVA)', 'income', 'royalties', 'expenditure', 'assets', 'quality-adjusted life years (QALYs)').

#### Guidance for standardisation

- Where possible, use the following formulation: '... [TERM(S)] of ... [ALPHABETIC CURRENCY CODE][CURRENCY VALUE] ...' (e.g. 'profit of GBP1,000', 'turnover of approximately GBP80,000,000', 'gross value added of GBP1,400,000 per year').<sup>22</sup>
- Where possible, use more specific terms to express the financial indicator terms in the above formulation. Thus, if describing 'profit', specify the type of profit (e.g. 'gross profit', 'post-tax profit', 'pre-tax profit', 'net profit', etc.); if describing 'expenditure', specify the type of expenditure (e.g. 'capital expenditure', 'health expenditure', 'public expenditure', 'total expenditure', etc.).
- For 'return on investment', use 'ROI'; for 'gross value added', use 'GVA'; for 'quality-adjusted life years', use 'QALYs'.



## 3.5. Emissions

### Description

A number of case studies refer to changes in emissions, referencing greenhouse gases in general, and also more specifically, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrogen oxides. These terms are written out in a variety of ways (e.g. 'kg CO<sub>2</sub> of emissions reduction per day', 'tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>', 'Mt CO<sub>2</sub>e in greenhouse gas emissions', '479.1 megatons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent', 'CO<sub>2</sub>e (carbon dioxide equivalent) savings of over 9kg per unit').

### Guidance for standardisation

- Use the following abbreviations for carbon dioxide, carbon dioxide equivalent and nitrogen oxides respectively: 'CO<sub>2</sub>', 'CO<sub>2</sub>e', and 'NO<sub>x</sub>'.
- Use SI units for all compound units (e.g. 'MtCO<sub>2</sub>e/year', 'gCO<sub>2</sub>/km').



## 4 Concluding remarks

In this report, we have articulated guidance to standardise the use of quantitative indicators that are used as evidence of impact in the case studies submitted to the REF. The intention is for this document to help inform the guidance for the preparation of impact case studies for REF 2021. Providing a more standardised case study 'vocabulary' and 'reporting structure' of quantitative impact indicators could potentially facilitate a more effective and efficient (text-mining-based) analysis of these data across the body of case studies that are submitted by UK HEIs in REF 2021 (e.g. in terms of making certain quantitative indicators of impact more easily discoverable). This, in turn, could permit more detailed analyses of the data to demonstrate evidence of the wider impact of academic research in the UK.

To carry out the study, we relied on a mixed-methods approach that comprised a combination of text mining and qualitative techniques applied to the impact case studies that were submitted by UK HEIs to REF 2014. Based on our analysis, we have proposed two broad categories of standards. First, we have proposed a 'style guide' that contains common stylistic conventions that could be standardised to make quantitative indicators of impact more discoverable in the case studies. Second, we have suggested the use of some 'specific guidance' that addresses more specific and commonly occurring quantitative impact indicators.

It is important to reiterate that the specific standards we have identified are not intended to be comprehensive or definitive. Furthermore, these standards should be treated more as a set of guidance to consider while developing impact case studies for REF 2021, rather than exacting standards or restrictions on what can be written per se. The standards might not work in all instances and could, at times, result in the case study vocabulary becoming somewhat unwieldy. The case studies for REF 2014 paint a rich and diverse picture of the wider impact of UK universities' research on society and the economy; the guidance is not meant to overly reduce the diversity of what can be written, nor to impact the narrative nature of the case studies.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, the guidance across both categories of standards is predominantly based on the quantitative impact indicators that we identified as being the most commonly occurring across the REF 2014 case studies; they do not encompass all types of quantitative indicators of impact. While the guidance helps to make quantitative indicators more discoverable within cases studies, all quantitative indicators should be used responsibly, taking into account the context as well as the numerical value, in line with the principles of use of metrics outlined in *The Metric Tide* (Wilsdon et al. 2015). Furthermore, the guidance may allow for cross-case study

comparison during assessment. If such a comparison is carried out, care should be taken to ensure that it is carried out responsibly.

Finally, although the primary aim of this study is to help inform the guidance for impact case study submission for REF 2021, we believe that the analyses may also be of interest to other stakeholders. These include individuals and organisations seeking to better understand how to demonstrate and articulate the impact of research and, more broadly, to anyone interested in the assessment of research and the wider impact of university research.

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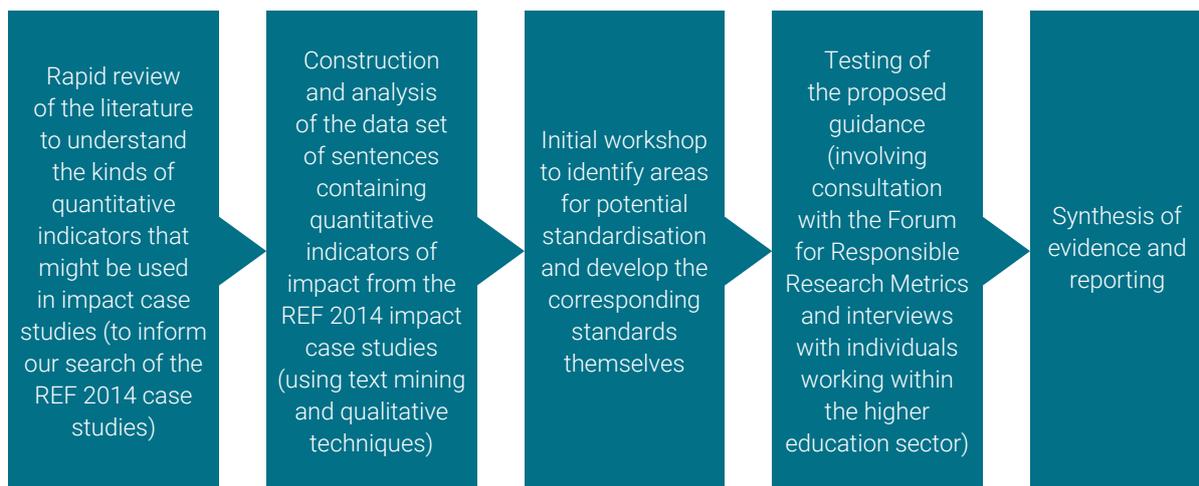
## Appendix A. Detailed methodology

The study was conducted over a nine-week period through five primary tasks, as illustrated in Figure A.1. We adopted a mixed-methods approach that involved a mix of text mining and qualitative techniques. The main tasks involved in the work were:

- A rapid review of the literature
- Construction and analysis of the data set
- An internal workshop to identify areas for potential standardisation
- Testing of the proposed standards
- Synthesis of the evidence and reporting

We describe each of these tasks in more detail in the following sections.

**Figure A.1 Schema illustrating the research approach**



Source: RAND Europe representation

## A.1. Rapid review of the literature

To focus our search of the REF 2014 case studies, we reviewed a few key documents to understand the different kinds of quantitative indicators that might be used in impact case studies. Notable documents included *The Metric Tide* (Wilsdon et al. 2015) and analyses conducted by King's College London and Digital Science (King's College London and Digital Science 2015) and Northumbria University (Chowdhury et al. 2016). The quantitative indicators most commonly referred to related to public engagement, economic activity and training,<sup>23</sup> all of which could be considered widely applicable to most units of assessment (UOAs) in the REF. We then undertook some targeted searches to consider a few specific disciplines that have key performance indicators that could have been used in impact case studies, such as changes in environmental quality, impact related to education and student achievement, impact related to criminal justice and public services, and indicators of enhanced quality of life. The long list of indicators we derived from these sources gave us a wide range of specific terms and figures that we could reasonably expect to find in the impact case study data set.

## A.2. Construction and analysis of the quantitative impact indicator data set

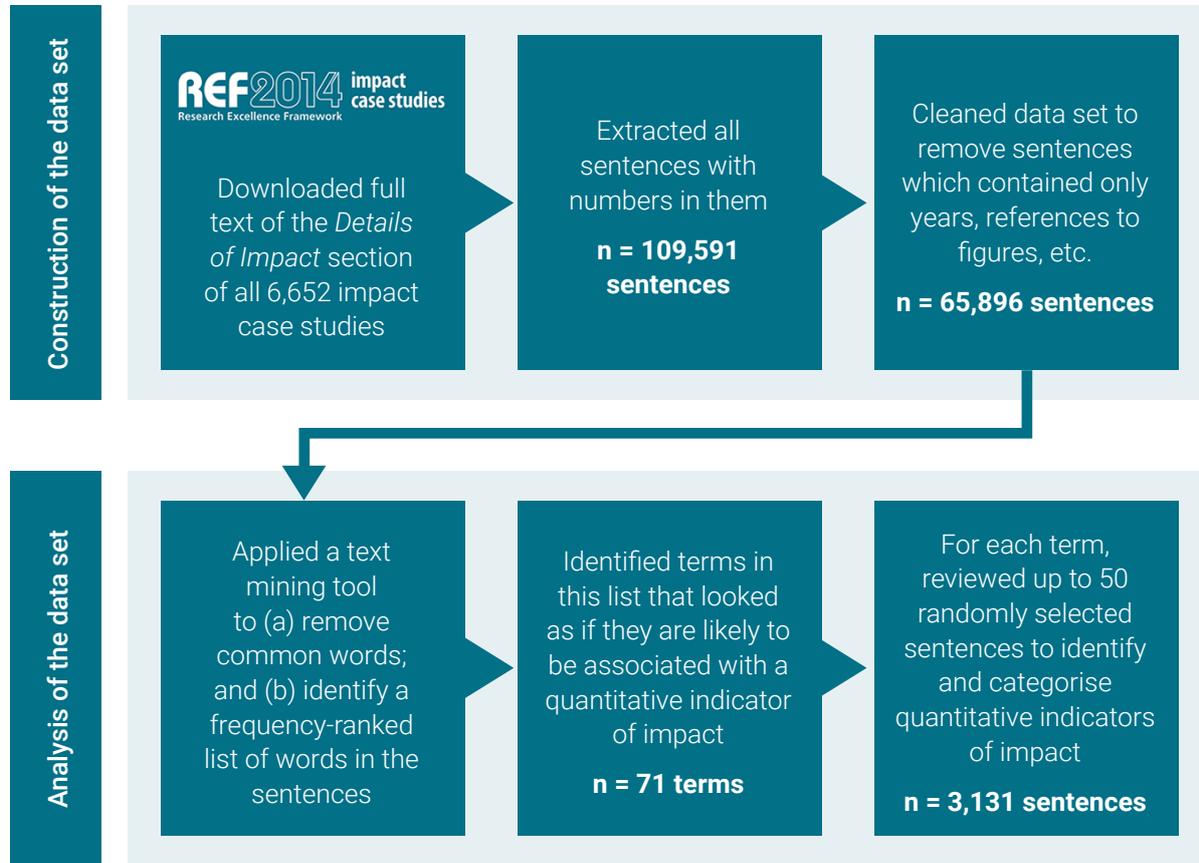
The second step in our approach involved the construction and analysis of a data set that contained all of the sentences from the REF 2014 impact case studies that might comprise quantitative indicators of impact. A diagram showing the main steps involved in this process is shown in Figure A.2.

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For example, the number of citations in a policy or practitioner document, number of visitors to a gallery/exhibition, number of patents/licenses created, number of jobs created, amount of revenue generated, number of training resources created.

**Figure A.2 Schema illustrating steps involved in constructing and analysing the data set**



Source: RAND Europe representation

### A.2.1. Construction of the data set

We downloaded the full text of the impact case studies from all 36 UOAs from the Research Excellence Framework online case study database (HEFCE 2018). This covered a total of 6,652 case studies, which were relatively evenly distributed across the four main panels,<sup>24</sup> as shown in Table A.1.

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For REF 2014, HEIs made submissions in 36 UOAs that were distributed across four main panels: Main Panel A broadly focussed on medicine, health and life sciences; Main Panel B broadly focussed on physical sciences, engineering and mathematics; Main Panel C broadly focussed on social sciences; and Main Panel D broadly focussed on arts and humanities.

**Table A.1 Distribution of REF impact case studies across the individual UOAs**

Unit of assessment	Number of case studies	Unit of assessment	Number of case studies
<b>Main Panel A</b>	<b>1,589</b>	<b>Main Panel B</b>	<b>1,475</b>
1 - Clinical Medicine	383	7 - Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences	171
2 - Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care	163	8 - Chemistry	125
3 - Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy	343	9 - Physics	181
4 - Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience	317	10 - Mathematical Sciences	210
5 - Biological Sciences	257	11 - Computer Science and Informatics	251
6 - Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science	126	12 - Aeronautical, Mechanical, Chemical and Manufacturing Engineering	120
		13 - Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Metallurgy and Materials	126
		14 - Civil and Construction Engineering	51
		15 - General Engineering	240
<b>Main Panel C</b>	<b>1,969</b>	<b>Main Panel D</b>	<b>1,619</b>
16 - Architecture, Built Environment and Planning	142	27 - Area Studies	69
17 - Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology	235	28 - Modern Languages and Linguistics	190
18 - Economics and Econometrics	98	29 - English Language and Literature	281
19 - Business and Management Studies	411	30 - History	263
20 - Law	216	31 - Classics	59
21 - Politics and International Studies	166	32 - Philosophy	98
22 - Social Work and Social Policy	187	33 - Theology and Religious Studies	75
23 - Sociology	97	34 - Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory	231
24 - Anthropology and Development Studies	80	35 - Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts	194
25 - Education	215	36 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management	159
26 - Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism	122		

Source: Research Excellence Framework online database (HEFCE 2018)

Each case study contained information about the submitting institution, unit of assessment, title and details of the impact. We split the 'details of impact' section of each case study into individual sentences (109,591 sentences in total) using the natural-language processing package openNLP<sup>25</sup> for R<sup>26</sup> and identified all numerical information in each sentence (The R Project for Statistical Computing 2016, 2018). Subsequently, we filtered out data unrelated to indicators, such as dates; figure, table or page numbers; other references; and names (e.g. 'BBC Radio 4'). We then deleted all sentences without any remaining numerical data, leaving 65,896 sentences for analysis. Note that the numerical data unrelated to indicators were kept in the remaining sentences; the filtering process is shown on selected examples below:

- **Sentence wholly filtered out:**  
'For example the 2008 guidelines from the Royal College of Physicians National Collaborating Centre for Chronic Conditions 'Stroke: national clinical guideline for diagnosis and initial management of acute stroke and transient ischaemic attack (TIA)''
- **Sentence included in the analysis without relevant indicator-related information:**  
'Each year in England alone approximately 152000 people suffer a stroke.'
- **Sentence included in the analysis with relevant indicator-related information:**  
'In addition this cost benefit goes up by around £1 million a year as grafts continue to function and patients do not need dialysis.'

### A.2.2. Analysis of the data set

To analyse the data set, we used a RAND text-mining tool (RAND-Lex)<sup>27</sup> to remove very common words (e.g. 'and', 'for', 'by', etc.) and to identify the frequency of the remaining words in the sentences. We then identified terms in this list that either (i) looked as if they are likely to be associated with a numerical indication of size or change (such as 'used', 'people', 'increased' and 'visited') or (ii) were associated with categories of indicators identified in the literature review (such as 'QALY', 'pollution' or 'matriculated'). For each term, we reviewed up to 50 randomly chosen sentences and recorded whether or not they have an indicator in them; the type of indicator; and words that are associated with the number and help describe the type of indicator. As we progressed through the list of terms, we adjusted how terms were selected to ensure that a wide variety of indicators were picked up. For example, after 20 terms, we noticed that terms describing groups of individuals (such as 'patients', 'audience' and 'children') yielded similar types of impact indicators. We therefore stopped choosing terms of this nature.

In total, we manually reviewed 3,131 of the 65,896 sentences (5%). Of the 3,131 sentences we reviewed, 1,313 (42%) were identified as containing quantitative impact indicators and 489 (16%) were identified as being descriptive, i.e. the numerical information is clearly presented in the sentence, but it seems to 'set the scene' for the context in which the work occurred rather than

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25 openNLP is a natural-language processing package for the statistical software package R (The R Project for Statistical Computing 2016).

26 R is a statistical software package (The R Project for Statistical Computing 2018)

27 RAND-Lex is a text analytics software suite developed by the RAND Corporation for internal use of RAND researchers. RAND-Lex includes statistical testing, expert workflows and tooltips that allow users to answer policy questions through empirical analysis of text collections too large or onerous for human labour to read and analyse.

describe any impact. An example of a descriptive sentence is: 'The US Department of Agriculture reports 7.9% heifer mortality.' We reviewed sentences from across all UOAs, covering between 9% and 3% of the sentences with numbers in them from each UOA (Tables A.2 and A.3). The percentage of sentences from each UOA classified as containing a quantitative indicator of impact ranged from 19% to 16% (Tables A.4 and A.5).

**Table A.2 Number of sentences containing numerical data by main panel**

Main panel	Number of sentences containing numerical data	Number of sentences reviewed	Percentage of sentences reviewed
A	15793	904	6%
B	14798	835	6%
C	18112	781	4%
D	17193	611	4%

Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table A.3 Number of sentences containing numerical data by UOA**

Main panel	UOA	Number of sentences containing numerical data	Number of sentences reviewed	Percentage of sentences reviewed
A	1	3841	252	7%
	2	1452	86	6%
	3	3430	171	5%
	4	3305	152	5%
	5	2672	153	6%
	6	1093	90	8%
B	7	1642	140	9%
	8	1499	77	5%
	9	1975	107	5%
	10	1640	89	5%
	11	2357	87	4%
	12	1136	79	7%
	13	1379	64	5%
	14	612	47	8%
	15	2558	145	6%

Main panel	UOA	Number of sentences containing numerical data	Number of sentences reviewed	Percentage of sentences reviewed
C	16	1361	85	6%
	17	2459	135	5%
	18	651	25	4%
	19	3630	175	5%
	20	2110	58	3%
	21	1330	41	3%
	22	1676	73	4%
	23	826	31	4%
	24	770	23	3%
	25	2103	90	4%
D	26	1196	45	4%
	27	619	19	3%
	28	2406	75	3%
	29	3224	110	3%
	30	2982	97	3%
	31	774	24	3%
	32	804	27	3%
	33	790	22	3%
	34	2373	121	5%
	35	1955	76	4%
	36	1266	40	3%

Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table A.4 Classification of reviewed sentences by main panel**

Main panel	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as descriptive	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as not containing a quantitative indicator of impact	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as containing a quantitative indicator of impact
A	20%	41%	38%
B	20%	35%	46%
C	13%	49%	38%
D	7%	46%	47%

Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table A.5 Classification of reviewed sentences by UOA**

Main panel	UOA	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as descriptive	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as not containing a quantitative indicator of impact	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as containing a quantitative indicator of impact
A	1	27%	38%	35%
	2	17%	44%	38%
	3	16%	44%	40%
	4	14%	47%	38%
	5	19%	43%	38%
	6	26%	26%	49%
B	7	21%	41%	38%
	8	16%	38%	47%
	9	21%	26%	53%
	10	25%	47%	28%
	11	11%	39%	49%
	12	13%	30%	57%
	13	19%	36%	45%
	14	28%	32%	40%
	15	23%	25%	52%
C	16	16%	36%	47%
	17	15%	33%	53%
	18	20%	44%	36%
	19	15%	47%	37%
	20	9%	72%	19%
	21	12%	66%	22%
	22	7%	60%	33%
	23	16%	39%	45%
	24	4%	74%	22%
	25	11%	57%	32%
	26	9%	53%	38%

Main panel	UOA	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as descriptive	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as not containing a quantitative indicator of impact	Percentage of reviewed sentences classified as containing a quantitative indicator of impact
D	27	26%	42%	32%
	28	4%	64%	31%
	29	5%	41%	54%
	30	6%	41%	52%
	31	4%	38%	58%
	32	4%	44%	52%
	33	14%	45%	41%
	34	7%	42%	51%
	35	7%	50%	43%
	36	5%	55%	40%

Source: RAND Europe analysis

We categorised the sentences that contained quantitative indicators of impact into seven overall categories: People, Economic, Reach, Significance, Prestige, Health, and Environment (Table A.6).<sup>28</sup> A total of 66 of the sentences were classified in multiple categories because they either contained multiple separate indicators from different categories or an indicator that fit into multiple categories (e.g. indicators describing quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) were classified into both Health and Economic). Sentences classified into People, Economic, Reach, Significance, and Prestige come from across the UOAs; sentences classified into Health and Environment largely come from UOAs 1–16 (Tables A.7 and A.8).

**Table A.6 Breakdown of indicators identified in each category**

Category	Description	Number of sentences that contain this indicator	Percentage of total sentences (n=1313) that contain this indicator
People	Instances where people, organisations, schools, countries, etc., visited, were trained, participated, attended, downloaded, or viewed the researcher's content. Sentences aimed at demonstrating the size of an 'audience'.	463	35%
Economic	Instances where economic savings, investments, sales, payments and currency symbols were referenced around the key numerical figure.	392	30%

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Initial categorisation was based on the spread of indicators found in the literature review. These categories were then amended based on our manual inspection of the sentences to represent the main categories within the data.

Category	Description	Number of sentences that contain this indicator	Percentage of total sentences (n=1313) that contain this indicator
Reach	Instances where there was a definitive quantitative figure that aimed to convey <i>reach</i> , but did not define the size of the audience in any way.	68	5%
Significance	Use of results from a visitor satisfaction survey or other form of project evaluation to validate the success/significance of a researcher's work.	148	11%
Prestige	Numerical evidence that aims to convey the researcher's prominence in the field, such as rankings in bestseller lists, 'citations', 'top 10', 'provided evidence'.	54	4%
Health	Instances of improving health outcomes, saving lives, accident rates, etc.	63	5%
Environment	Instances of improving environmental outcomes.	59	4%
Combination	Instances where single sentences contained quantitative impact information that fell in more than one category.	66	5%

Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table A.7 Breakdown of indicators identified in each category by main panel**

Main panel	A	B	C	D
Economic	97	174	66	55
Environment	11	42	6	0
Health	55	7	1	0
Reach	17	22	18	11
People	93	71	126	173
Prestige	12	7	24	11
Significance	43	45	38	22
Combination	20	7	13	15

Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table A.8 Breakdown of indicators identified in each category by UOA**

Main panel	A					B					C					D																						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36		
UOA	21	4	21	11	24	16	20	16	23	11	24	21	19	6	34	7	16	4	23	0	0	2	4	0	4	6	1	1	14	7	4	4	0	13	7	4		
Economic	0	0	0	0	6	5	7	3	0	1	2	10	5	2	12	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Environment	27	13	7	5	3	0	1	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Health	3	1	5	1	2	5	5	3	2	1	3	0	2	0	6	4	4	0	1	1	1	1	2	0	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	4	1
Reach	15	7	20	31	11	9	9	7	17	5	11	2	3	5	12	12	36	1	23	4	4	14	9	2	15	6	2	19	32	31	8	8	9	30	24	10		
People	5	2	2	0	1	2	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	5	1	3	4	1	3	4	1	3	0	0	2	3	1	0	1	0	3	0	1		
Prestige	9	3	9	8	9	5	6	2	8	5	2	8	0	5	9	4	8	2	12	2	2	2	2	0	1	2	3	2	1	5	5	1	1	0	7	0	0	
Significance	7	3	4	2	2	2	1	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	4	6	0	0	0	4	1	0	1	
Combination																																						

Source: RAND Europe analysis

### A.3. Internal workshop to identify areas for potential standardisation

After we categorised the sentences from the impact case studies containing quantitative information, we conducted an internal workshop to draw together the evidence from the previous tasks, with the aim of (i) selecting particular areas for potential standardisation; and (ii) proposing a set of concrete standards for each of these areas. We reviewed the sentences within and across the categories identified in the previous task (Table A.6) and used a set of criteria to select the provisional areas of standardisation and to develop the standards themselves. These criteria (listed in Table A.9) were applied informally during the workshop to help inform our decisions. Not all categories contained areas that were standardisable.

**Table A.9 Rationale for standardisation**

<b>Criteria for selecting the areas of standardisation (i.e. the types of indicators to be standardised)</b>
Frequently occurs in the impact case study sentences examined
Is an area of anticipated post-REF analysis
Is an area where standardisation would improve the ease of analysis
<b>Criteria for selecting the standards for these indicators</b>
Is one of the most commonly used formulations across the impact case studies
Aligns with existing standards (based on evidence in the literature), with a focus on the UK context if relevant
Does not place an undue burden on impact case study authors
Facilitates post-REF analysis while not significantly affecting the narrative nature of the impact case studies

Source: RAND Europe analysis

At this stage, we proposed two high-level categories of standards. We proposed the use of a 'style guide' that contains stylistic items that could be standardised to make quantitative indicators of impact, and specific formulations of them, more discoverable across the impact case studies. The topics to be covered by the style guide included numbers, percentages and rates, measures of change, time periods, units and currency. In addition, we developed 'specific guidance' that addresses more specific and commonly occurring quantitative indicators of impact in the case studies. The areas covered by the specific guidance included engagement, mentions in non-academic documents and the media, employment, financial figures and emissions. Table A.10 sets out the key rationales that we used to select the areas of standardisation and to develop the specific standards themselves. Table A.11 provides more detailed rationales for four of the sets of guidance (related to numbers, currency, engagement and employment). This table is intended to illustrate the types of decisions that were taken to develop the guidance. This table incorporates the views from the standards-testing phase, described in more detail in the next section.

**Table A.10 Key rationales used for selecting the areas of standardisation and developing the standards themselves**

		Style guide						Specific guidance				
		Numbers	Percentages and rates	Measures of change	Time periods	Units	Currency	Engagement	Mentions in non-academic documents and the media	Employment	Financial figures	Emissions
Criteria for selecting the areas of standardisation (i.e. the types of indicators to be standardised)	Frequently occurs in the impact case study sentences examined	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Is an area of anticipated post-REF analysis						✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Is an area where standardisation would improve the ease of analysis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criteria for selecting the standards for these indicators	Is one of the most commonly used formulations across the impact case studies	✓	✓			✓						✓
	Aligns with existing standards (based on the evidence in the literature), with a focus on the UK context if relevant					✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
	Does not place an undue burden on impact case study authors	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Facilitates post-REF analysis while not significantly affecting the narrative nature of the impact case studies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: RAND Europe analysis

**Table A.11 Detailed exemplary rationale for selected areas of proposed guidance**

Area of standardisation	Guidance for standardisation	Rationale
Numbers		We proposed guidance for numbers to improve discoverability, so that all numbers are written in the same way.
	Use numerals when referring to quantitative indicators of impact (e.g. '4', '1,567', '2,000,000').	Numbers are most commonly written out using numerals; therefore we propose this as the standard way of writing them, including small numbers, which, according to many style guides, would be written out.
	Use commas for the thousands separator in numbers of 4 digits or more (e.g. '1,567', '2,000,000').	There are a variety of ways numbers could be written out, many of which are discoverable using text mining provided they are all written the same way. We have proposed for them to be written out using comma separation, as this maintains readability.
	Use precise figures where possible. If using a non-exact figure, use 'approximately [X]' (e.g. 'approximately 100 people', 'approximately GBP1,000,000').	We have proposed the use of just one term to indicate lack of certainty in relation to a number. 'Approximately' was the most commonly used way of indicating lack of certainty in the REF 2014 case studies.
	If decimal points are necessary, use 2 decimal points where possible (e.g. '0.29', '8.17', '2,000.88').	In order to provide consistency across the case studies, we have also proposed the number of decimal points to use where appropriate (the chosen number is 2).
Currency		We proposed guidance for currency to improve discoverability, so that all currency amounts are written in a consistent manner and so that enough information is provided that figures not in GBP are convertible to GBP.
	Where currency is described, use the three-letter alphabetic currency code as specified in the ISO standard, ISO 4217:2015 (e.g. GBP, EUR, USD, AUD).	Three-letter alphabetic currency codes were chosen because they are unique, while symbols (which were more commonly used in the case studies) are not (e.g. \$ can be used to refer to USD, AUD, etc.)
	Do not include a space between the currency code and the number (e.g. 'GBP100', 'GBP8,170.48').	We have proposed a specific way to use the alphabetic currency codes, to ensure ease of discoverability.
	Use GBP as the standard currency.	GBP was chosen as the standard currency because it is the currency in the UK.
	If a currency other than GBP is used, provide the month and year in which the original figure was calculated in parentheses following the figure (e.g. 'has contributed approximately USD19,000,000 (August 2013) gross value-added (GVA) to the region in shareholder return salaries and infrastructure spend').	We have proposed that, if the currency is not in GBP, the month of the currency figure be provided to ensure that conversion to GBP is possible when post-REF analysis is carried out.

Area of standardisation	Guidance for standardisation	Rationale
Engagement		Sentences describing engagement are common within the case studies and are of interest for post-REF analysis.
	Use specific terms where appropriate (e.g. 'parents', 'children', 'students').	We chose to keep and encourage such specific terms because interviewees felt that they were very important for the analysis of the case studies during the REF exercise.
	Use the formulation '... [X] people ([SPECIFIC INFORMATION]) ...' (e.g. 'viewed by 50 people (children aged 10 to 15 and their school teachers)', 'attended by approximately 2,500 people (junior doctors)').	To allow for discoverability, we propose that, as well as the specific information, the number of people is also provided. For readability, we suggest that the number of people be placed before the more specific details.
Employment		Descriptions of numbers of staff were common in the case studies, but the ways in which they were described varied.
	When referring to increasing employment as an outcome of research, where possible include both the headcount and the number of FTEs (where FTE is full-time equivalent) (e.g. 'generated 10 jobs (headcount: 10; FTEs: 10)', 'this created 50 part-time jobs (headcount: 50; FTEs: 25)').	FTE and headcount were chosen as two ways to standardise descriptions of employment, as they each have specific definitions. We chose two ways for describing employment instead of one because interviewees raised the importance of being able to retain the key details for the analysis of the case studies during the REF exercise.

Source: RAND Europe analysis

## A.4. Testing of the proposed standards

The different indicators that were identified for potential standardisation, as well as the corresponding proposed standards themselves, were tested, validated and refined through a process of iterative consultation with experts. We first consulted the REF Environment Working Group of the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics (FFRRM) at a workshop organised by HEFCE on 5 February 2018. In addition, between 15 and 20 February 2018, we conducted 5 targeted semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders that included senior experts working in the higher education sector. The interviewees spanned multiple disciplines, including research management, the sciences, the arts and humanities, and scientometrics.

The FFRRM Working Group members and the interviewees were provided with a summary of the findings in advance of the presentation and interviews, respectively. Through these consultations, we sought to obtain feedback on the indicators and the proposed standards. Some of the main questions we asked included the following:

- What indicators are missing that could potentially be standardised?
- What observations do you have in relation to the appropriateness of the suggested standards?

- Is the disciplinary spread of indicators described appropriate?
- What are some of the challenges that the suggested standards could pose for implementation (e.g. with respect to specific disciplines)?<sup>29</sup>

The Working Group members and interviewees were all largely supportive of the approach taken by us to produce guidance for standardisation. The list of areas for standardisation was felt to be generally appropriate, and there was no indication that there were major gaps. At the FFRRM Working Group meeting, there was a discussion about whether digital engagement, such as website views, downloads and social media engagement, should be standardised. On the whole, it was felt that, as there are so many different indicators in this area, standardising them would not be appropriate. Two interviewees also felt that digital engagement was the one area where there may be a gap, but they appreciated why standardising this area might be challenging.

At the FFRRM Working Group meeting and during the interviews, we discussed the details of some of the specific guidance for standardisation that we had proposed. In particular in relation to the area of engagement, concerns were raised that moving towards standardisation could potentially lead to loss of key details of interest during the analysis of the case studies themselves. Interviewees also commented on some of the specific terminology we had used, and they asked about specific cases that did not fit within our preliminary guidance for standardisation. These details were used to refine the guidance for standardisation. The discussions also touched on the underlying purpose of the standardisation and on potential issues that improving ease of analysis could raise for the use of responsible metrics, thus highlighting the need for REF guidance to be clear about how the data should and should not be used.

## A.5. Synthesis of evidence and reporting

In the final task, we triangulated and synthesised evidence from the previous tasks to produce a final report that addressed the core objectives of the study. The report highlights two categories of standardisation: (i) a 'style guide' that addresses the way quantitative data are presented in impact case studies; and (ii) 'specific guidance' that covers more specific and frequently occurring quantitative indicators that have been used as evidence of impact in the case studies. For each topic that we identified within these two categories, we provide a concise explanation about the indicator, followed by a proposed approach to standardising the indicator. We also include examples of use of the suggested guidance.

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<sup>29</sup>In relation to this question, one of the considerations was the potential introduction of additional burden on HEIs preparing impact case studies for REF 2021.