

Evaluation of the impact element of REF 2014



EUROPE

Preparation and assessment process

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Open Forum Events – King's House Conference Centre , Manchester
July 2015

RAND Europe is an independent not-for-profit public policy research institute



helping to improve policy and decisionmaking
through research and analysis

Overall objectives of the evaluation



Review the challenges and perceived benefits of the methodology being implemented



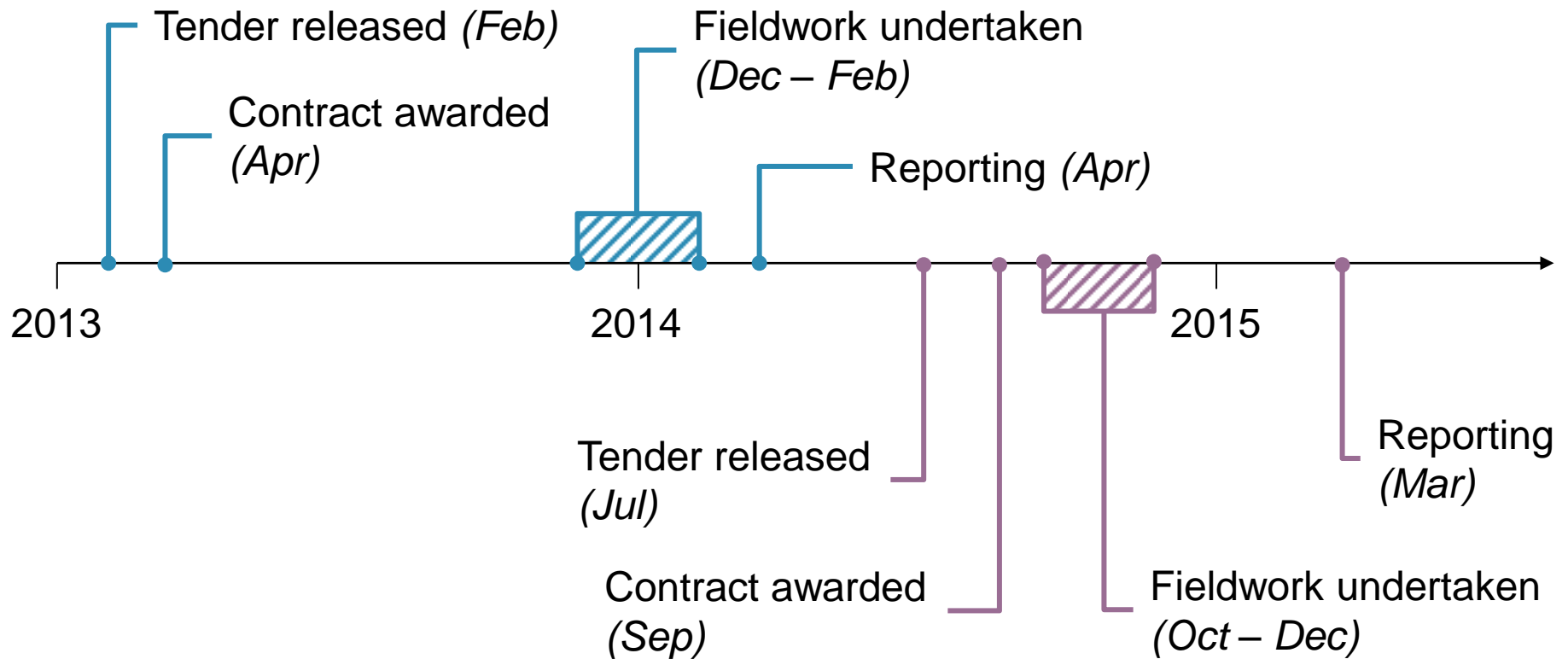
Determine whether it is fit for purpose in meeting the aim for assessing impact



To inform the development of future REF exercises

Timeline of evaluation

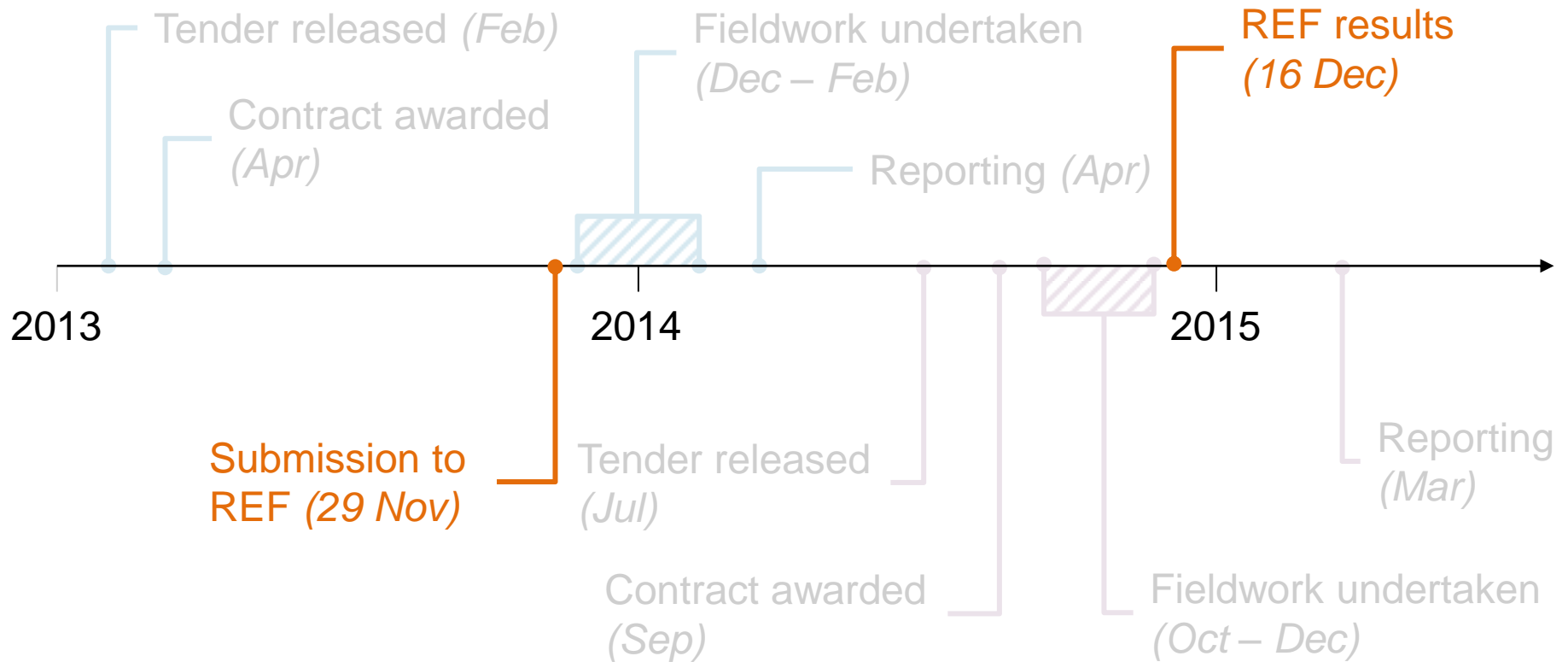
Phase 1



Phase 2

Timeline of evaluation

Phase 1

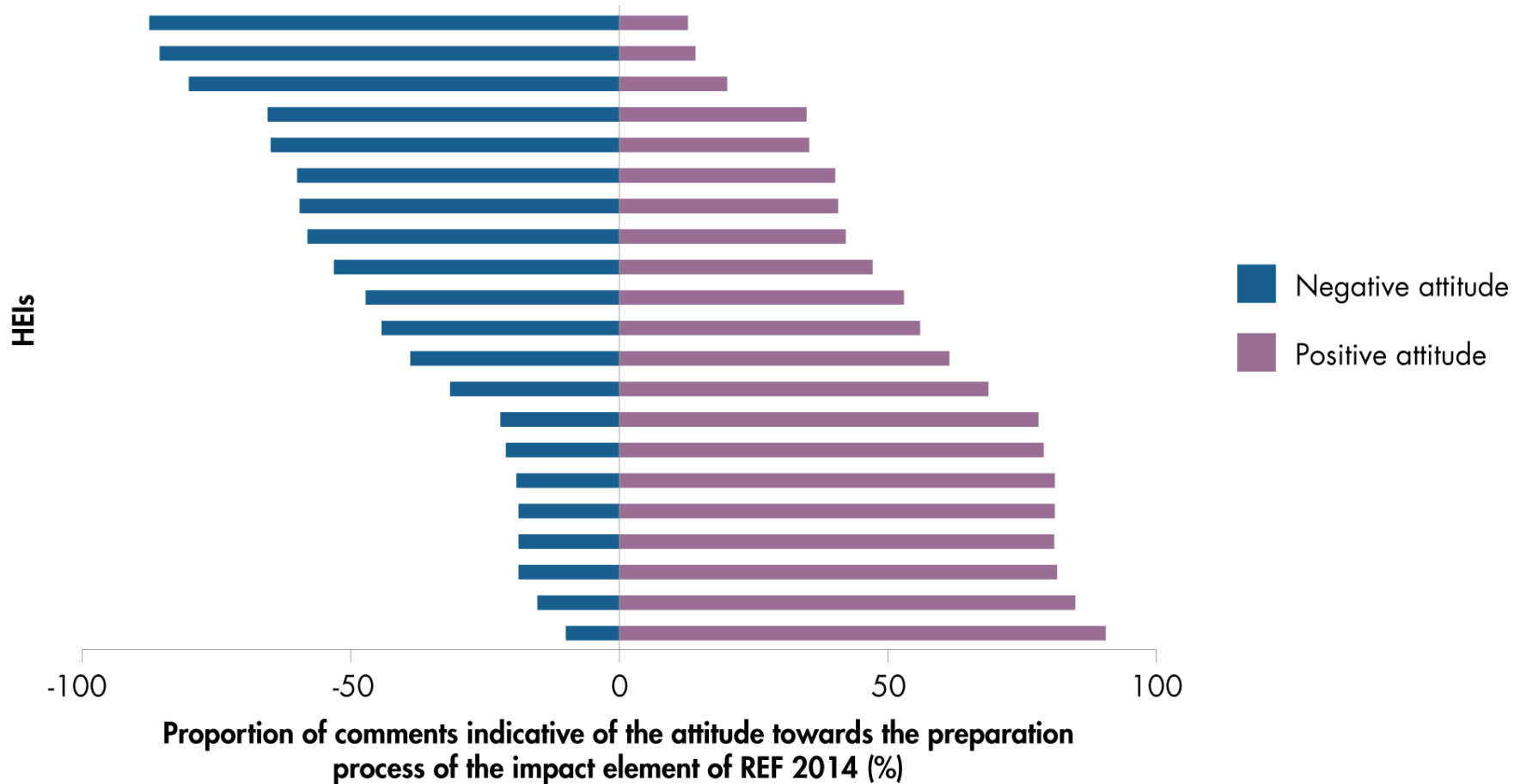


Phase 2

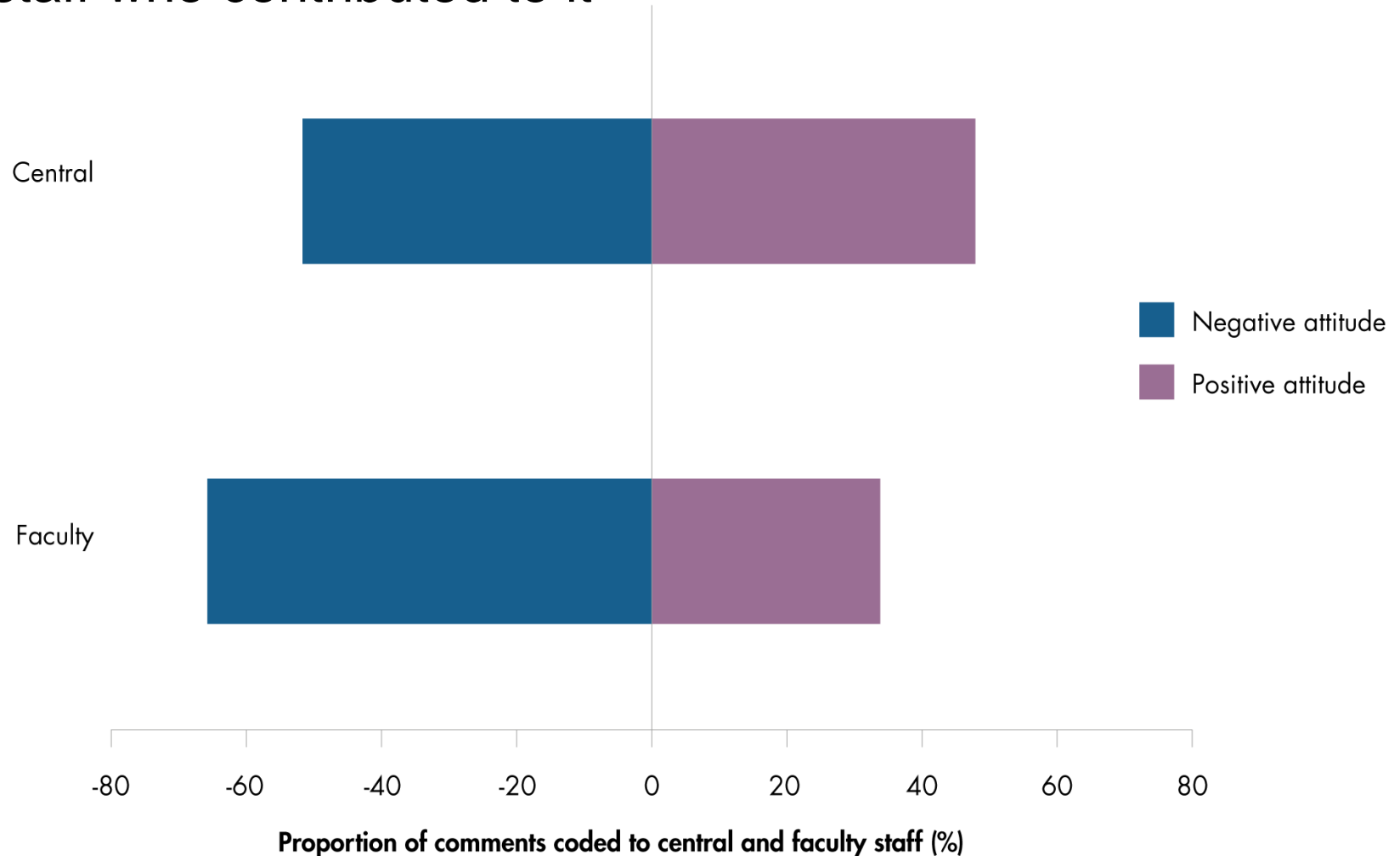
Overview

- Attitude towards impact
- Consequence of the assessment
- Burden of producing the assessment
- Research user engagement
- Benefits
- Perception of the assessment process

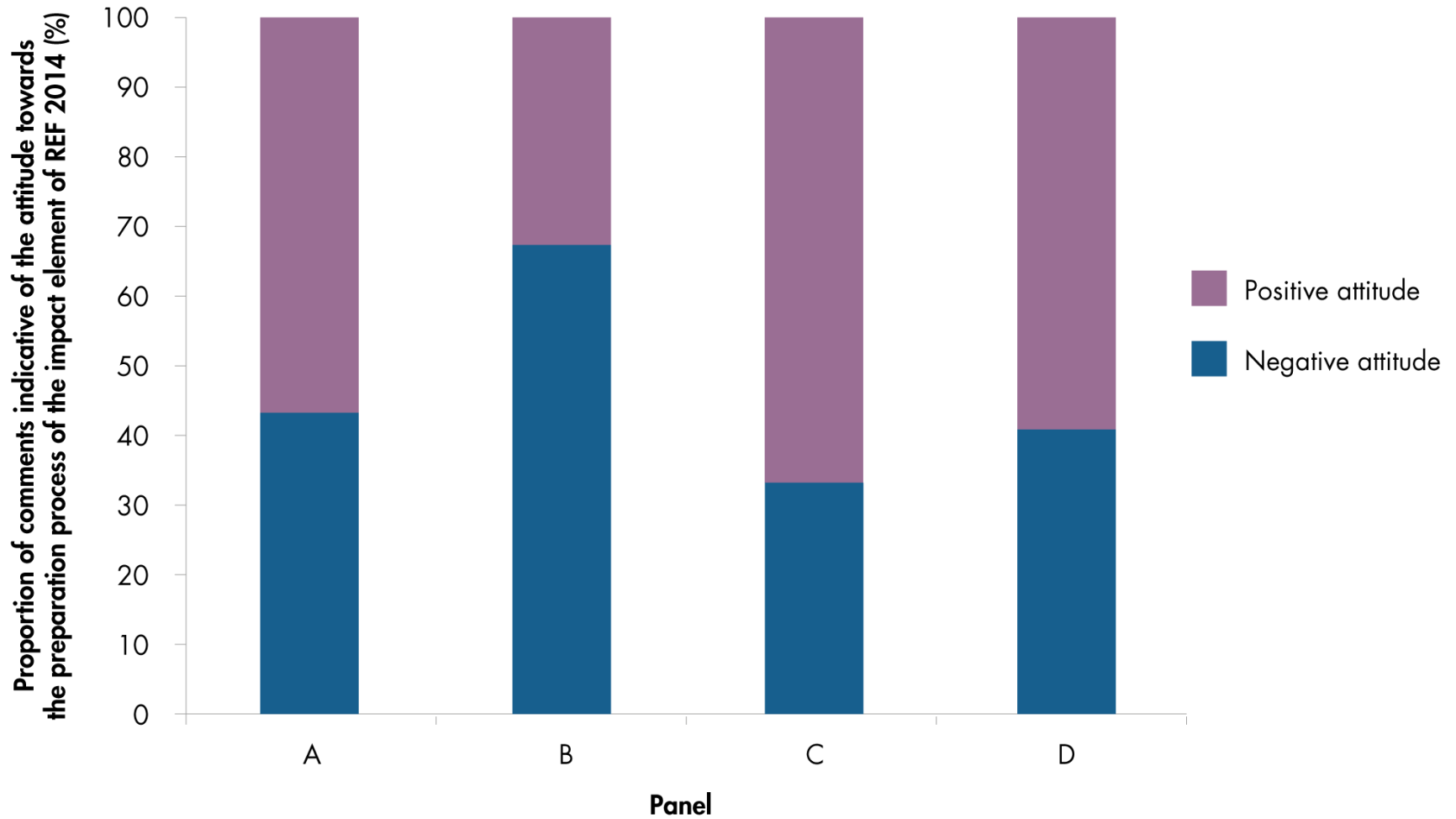
There was as much diversity of views and attitudes towards the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 within HEIs as there was between HEIs



Central staff responsible for managing institutional preparations for the impact element of REF 2014 were considerably more positive about the process than faculty staff who contributed to it



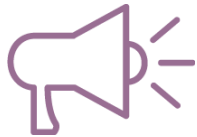
There were different attitudes by Main Panel



The impact case studies (REF3b) submitted may not be representative of the actual impact of research in the sector

'It is a sliver of what impact actually is going on. There is still a lot of other impact work that we do which wasn't included'

The definition of impact



Public
engagement

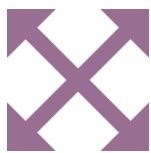


Impact on HEI
practice and teaching



Work undertaken by
PhD students

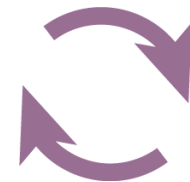
Sufficiency of evidence



Movement of individuals in
HEIs/research user
organisations



Commercially sensitive
or classified evidence



Certain types of impact
indicating 'softer' change

There is a concern that the impact agenda may begin to undermine 'blue skies' research

'People are thinking about changing the nature of their research to be more applied. Is this a bad thing? It may be if it damages the underlying blue sky which can develop outstanding impact areas if giving less imaginative science.'



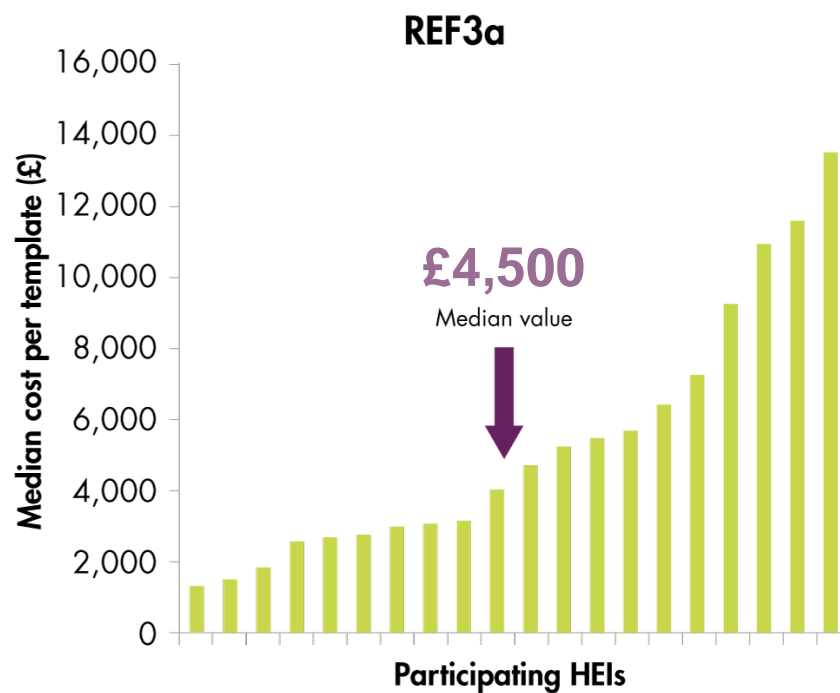
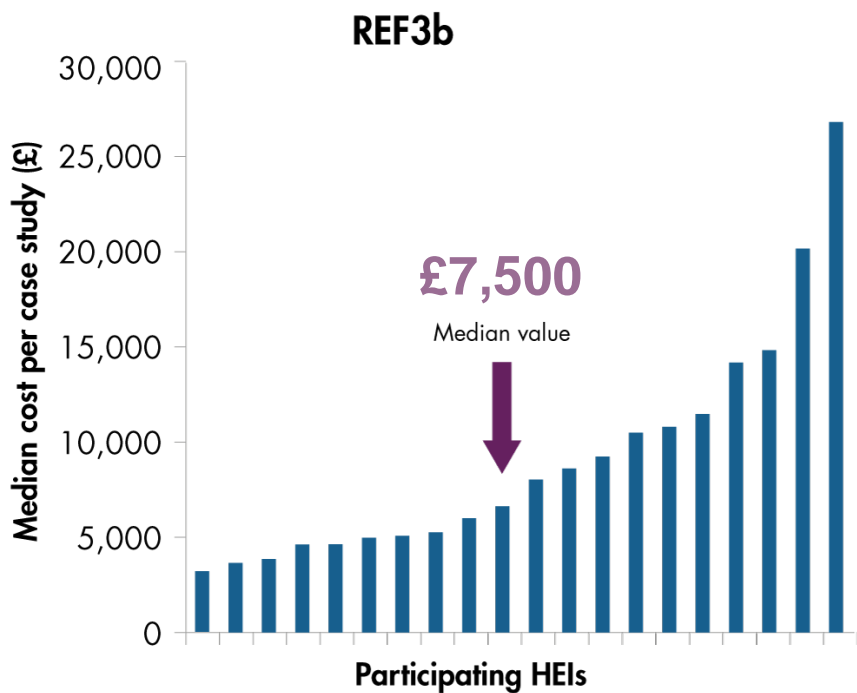
This may result in the focusing of research activities away from blue skies research and to more applied questions



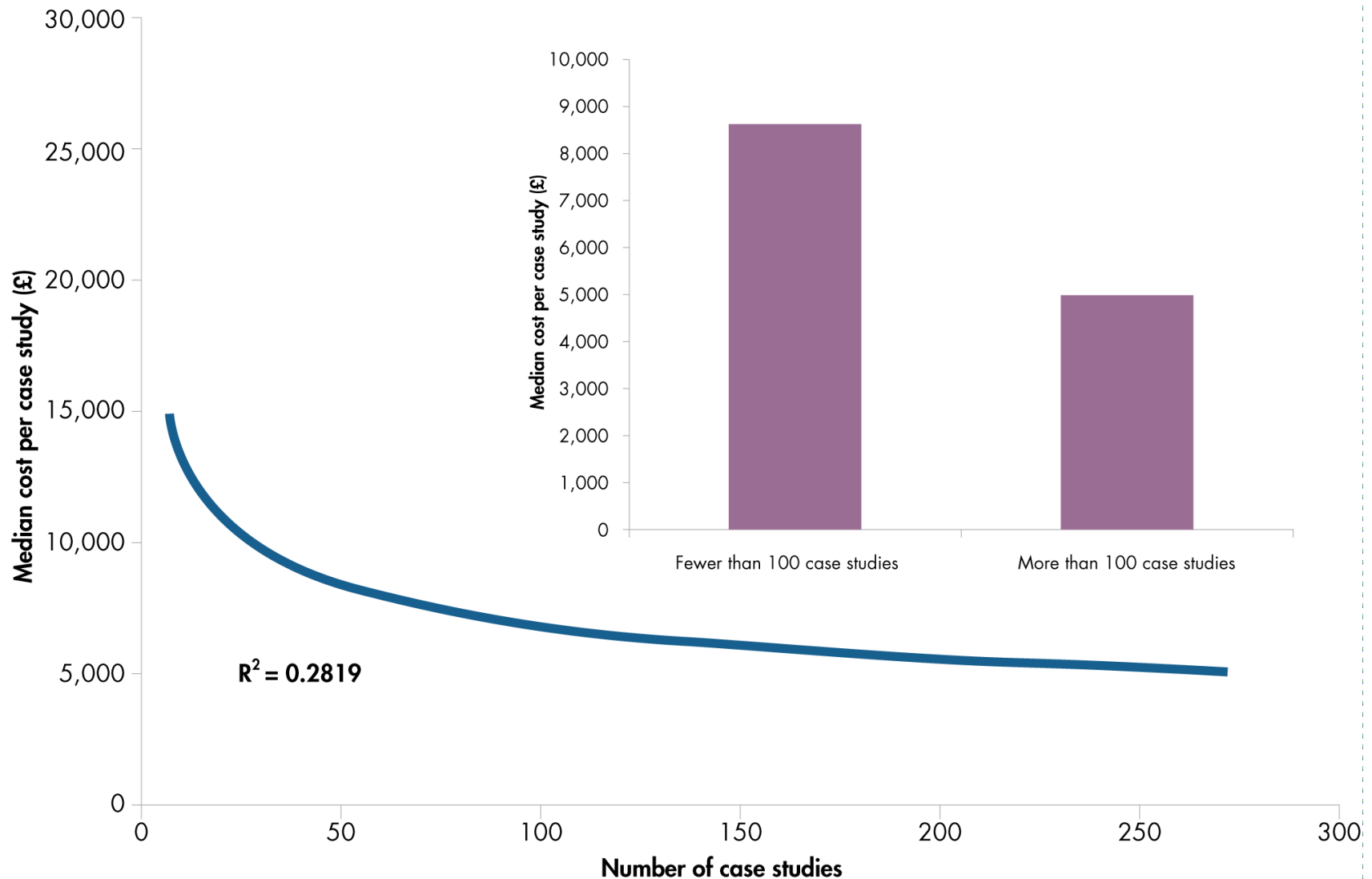
The impact agenda may move research towards areas that can more easily demonstrate impact and away from areas where impact is less easily demonstrated

The assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 was a significant new burden for HEIs

'During the past year, I have written zero papers, I have not given the usual attention to gaining research funding.'



There is evidence of economies of scale, that is median costs are less for larger submissions



Costs are higher for the REF than other similar exercises

30
days

to produce a
case study

5.1
days
REF Pilot

3
days

Excellence in
Innovation for
Australia (EIA)

HEIs perceived that the exercise had put an undue burden on research users although this was not their experience

[Academics] *'worried that pestering people they collaborate with could jeopardise their relationship'. (HEI perspective)*

'it was a manageable task'... Requests were not overly onerous' (Research user)



Academics felt that this exercise has changed the dynamics of relationships. There are divided views on the effect of this; ranging from that it has been productive to damaging



Research users commented on the positive benefits of strengthening and reaffirming relationships

There was evidence that assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 along with other policies (such as RCUK's 'Pathways to impact') and the broader 'impact agenda' has led to cultural change within HEIs

'I noticed my perception of research changing slightly and my passion to make an impact with my research enhanced; this was due to constant in-depth thinking about what we (and I) do in the unit and why we do it. I can say that I became totally immersed in the topic of impact and became fascinated by the area'

Impact case studies (REF3b)				Impact templates (REF3a)			
Types of benefit	% of total ideas about benefits (n=2338)	% of total respondents to survey (n=962)	Number of institutions (n=21)	Types of benefit	% of total ideas about benefits (n=635)	% of total respondents to survey (n=259)	Number of institutions (n=21)
Identifying and understanding impact	25%	48%	21	Identifying and understanding impact	29%	66%	20
Promotion or recognition	17%	33%	21	Thinking about strategy	27%	66%	20
Review and affirm relationships	9%	22%	21	Promotion and recognition	8%	20%	19

As a result of the impact agenda and changing culture, HEIs are changing their practice

'REF3A is informing the [impact] strategies that are currently being written'



Setting out an impact strategy



Fixed-term posts becoming permanent



Implementing systems to store evidence of impact



Capturing evidence of impact on an ongoing basis



Building a plan for impact into projects



Inclusion of impact as a criterion for promotion

By a large majority, panellists felt the process enabled them to assess impact in a fair, reliable and robust way

'I've been struck all the way through by... the efforts being made on the structure of the exercise to ensure that there was a fair and proper assessment.'

Total number of panellists involved in impact element: **1161**

Survey: **572**

Focus groups: **112**

1-2-1 interviews: **20**

Bringing together different perspectives of academics and research users was seen to be successful and valuable

'It was a stroke of genius to get people together to get that consensus generated.'

- Research users built useful networks but the burden of involvement was a significant challenge
- Engagement by academics in the process offered benefits for their careers and institutions



11 days (median)
7 – 15 days (inter-quartile range)

Areas for further thought and improvement

'There is much to commend [it] although there are improvements to be made and much to be learned.'



- Panellists felt they were able to differentiate between submissions in a more detail than the scoring process allowed them to express
- There was variation in the way the process was conducted



- There were particular challenges in assessing the impact templates
- Lack of requirement to evidence meant quality of writing had a large effect
- Options for the future:
 - Combine with environment template
 - Use of metrics and factual information
 - Remove it

Cross-cutting themes



Involvement of
research users



Need for evidence




Use of metrics





Impact templates

Further information





Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation
Approach and evidence

Catrina Manville, Molly Morgan Jones, Marie-Louise Herham, Sophie Castle-Clarke, Michael Freason, Sali Gunashekar and Jonathan Grant




Preparing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation
Findings and observations

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Assessing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation

Catrina Manville, Susan Guthrie, Marie-Louise Herham, Bryn Garrud, Sonia Sousa, Anne Kirley, Sophie Castle-Clarke and Tom Ling



Research Brief
Assessing impact submissions for REF 2014: An evaluation

Background

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 is a national initiative to assess the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). For the first time, REF 2014 introduced the wider impact of research, alongside the quality of research and the creativity of the research environment, into the assessment of research excellence in UK HEIs. The wider impact of research is weighted at 20% of the total assessment for 2014, so it is important to recognise wider societal benefits resulting from publicly funded research.

Understanding how the impact elements of the REF 2014 submission process were assessed will be important for future rounds of assessment, to assess future HEIs and to provide necessary feedback.

Goals of evaluating the assessment process

Following our evaluation of the submission process for www.randeurope.org/REF2014impact/, the first UK higher education leading bodies commissioned RAND Europe to evaluate the assessment process for the impact elements of REF 2014. The objectives of the evaluation were to:


- explore the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment process in delivering reliable, robust and fair outcomes
- identify any unforeseen issues emerging during the assessment process and evaluate the management of these
- outline broad suggestions for the assessment process for impact in future REF exercises, and
- understand the findings of this study within the context of the evaluation of the submission process.

Approach

A mixed methods approach was used to evaluate the assessment process, including face-to-face and telephone interviews, an online survey with members of the assessment panel and a case study, to produce robust conclusions and recommendations. In consultation with our evaluation of the submission process for REF 2014, this work will inform policy development for the next REF exercise.

Conclusions

Confidence in outcomes, and in the process used in the research impact assessment, was relatively high following completion of REF 2014 among those most involved. Based on the evidence presented in our report, the confidence was higher particularly in the limited guidelines and processes used, an evidence-led and inclusive approach to leadership, and the high level of commitment shown by academic and research staff. The introduction of an impact element in REF 2014 might have been expected to generate concern because of the relative novelty of the approach and because of diverse difficulties in assessment, but in general it was successful.



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Understanding how the impact elements of the REF 2014 submission process worked for HEIs and research users will be important for future rounds of assessment.

Goals of evaluating the preparation process

The UK higher education leading councils asked RAND Europe to evaluate the submission process undertaken by HEIs in preparing for the impact elements of REF 2014. This formative evaluation aimed to:

- describe the prepared benefits and barriers to HEIs and research users in preparing their impact submissions
- identify potential and unintended consequences of current research impact for different institutions and disciplines
- formulate evidence-based conclusions and recommendations for improving the processes of preparing submissions for impact assessment and
- highlight suitable practices for institutions, research users, the leading research and other stakeholders.



Approach

For this study we worked with 21 HEIs to understand their experience of the impact submission process, and we consulted with three broad stakeholder groups over the course of the evaluation.

- HEI research leadership teams
- HEI impact case study subjects and authors and
- non-academic stakeholders.

A mixed methods approach was used, including site visits, face-to-face and telephone interviews, online surveys and a 'benefits/barriers' analysis, to produce robust conclusions and recommendations.

Our findings are shaped by documented institutional operations. They identify practices that HEIs highlighted as suitable and that may support stakeholders' impact submissions for the impact elements of future rounds of assessment. In consultation with our evaluation of the assessment process for REF 2014 (www.randeurope.org/REF2014impact/), this work will inform policy development for the next REF exercise.



Available at: www.randeurope.org/REF2014impact