

# **Assessing the Impact of Complex Policy on the Science System: The case of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)**

**Maria Nedeva, Duncan Thomas and Mayra Morales Tirado**

MIoIR, The University of Manchester, UK

**Atlanta Conference on Science and Innovation Policy**

October 10-11, 2017

# Is there anything we have not heard about the REF?

It doesn't have to be the REF...

Question is... *how do we assess the impact of  
REF (or similar) without drifting into mystery  
and drama?*

# What is this about then?

A different (novel) approach to policy impact assessment using a typology of impact according to **intentionality** and **expectation**.

# What is the problem or why do we need a different approach?

**Problem 1:** Complex policies generate a complex mix of ‘impact’ and ‘effects’. ‘Traditional’ approaches don’t do them justice.

**Problem 2:** Assessing the policy (or organisation) depends on measuring effects that are beyond its control.

# What do we propose?

An approach to policy impact assessment that:

- Is more systematic and nuanced than existing approaches;
- Allows students of policy impact to narrow the change they look to measure and attribute;
- Enables policy learning and improvement.

# More specifically...

## Assumptions about impact:

- Impact is *a difference of A that can be partially or wholly attributed to B*
- Impact is *always about intentionality*
- Issues around *measuring and attributing* impact.

# Types of impact

---

**Intended**

**Unintended**

**Expected**

“Home runs”

Collateral

**Unexpected**

“Long shots”

Accidentals

---

# How does it work?

The policy is ‘**favourable**’ and ‘**appropriate**’

... when the number and degree of ‘*home runs*’ and ‘*long shots*’ exceeds the ‘*collateral*’ and ‘*accidentals*’.



# Let's look at the REF and its impact on UK universities

Need to unpack:

- Objectives (stated and implicit) of REF
- Implementation
- Organisational characteristics
- Linking mechanisms (soft causality)

# What are the REF objectives?

- To drive excellence of British science
- To encourage impact of research
- To allocate funding in publicly accountable ways
- Concentration of research resources

# What are organisational characteristics?

- Strategy and management
- Research environment (tangible, intangible)
- Core structures (promotions, recruitment probation)
- Research practices (problem selection, method selection, publication strategies, collaboration etc.)

# Now let's look at excellence...

## (i) Strategy and leadership

	Intended	Unintended
Expected	<b>HOME RUNS</b>  Leadership dedicated to <i>enabling</i> (not <i>managing</i> ) performance	<b>COLLATERAL</b>  Misreading signals from REF Game playing
Unexpected	<b>LONG SHOTS</b>  Strategy for repositioning scientists in knowledge communities	<b>ACCIDENTALS</b>  Conflict between academics and management

# Excellence (cont'd)...

## (ii) Research environment

	Intended	Unintended
<b>Expected</b>	<b>HOME RUNS</b>  Measurable improvement in research environment (resource, flexibility, support)	<b>COLLATERAL</b>  Boundless competition Surveillance and control “Accountants rule”
<b>Unexpected</b>	<b>LONG SHOTS</b>  World class labs Attracting world class talent	<b>ACCIDENTALS</b>  Unhealthy working environment (suicides, depression, mental health)

# Excellence (cont'd)...

## (iii) Core structures

	Intended	Unintended
Expected	HOME RUNS	COLLATERAL
	Core structure reflect research excellence criteria REF inclusion no place	Core structures subject to game playing (e.g. journal lists of publications) REF inclusion a career determinant Buying “stars” / transfer market
Unexpected	LONG SHOTS	ACCIDENTALS
	Growing local talent	Reduced variety at all levels and, by implication, lower excellence

# Excellence (cont'd)...

## (iv) Research practices

	Intended	Unintended
<b>Expected</b>	<b>HOME RUNS</b>  Quality criteria from research field (in relation to “knowledge pools”) Practices largely unaffected	<b>COLLATERAL</b>  Problem and method selection, collaboration affected
<b>Unexpected</b>	<b>LONG SHOTS</b>  Disproportionate intellectual leadership in all fields of science	<b>ACCIDENTALS</b> Tribalism Individualism (within organisations) Reduced performance in transnational knowledge communities

# Looking at coverage of ~ 40 articles on REF...

	Intended	Unintended
Expected	<b>“HOME RUNS”</b>	<b>COLLATERAL</b>
Unexpected	<b>“LONG SHOTS”</b>	<b>ACCIDENTALS</b>



# What next ... ?

# Thanks for listening

## Questions ... ?

[maria.nedeva@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:maria.nedeva@manchester.ac.uk)

[duncan.thomas@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:duncan.thomas@manchester.ac.uk)

[mayra.moralestirado@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk](mailto:mayra.moralestirado@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk)

### **Research funded by:**

- The Centre for Research Quality and Policy Impact Studies (R-QUEST)
- Knowledge in Science and Policy: Creating an Evidence Base for Converging Modes of Governance in Policy and Science (KNOWSCIENCE)