

London and REF 2021

About this paper

London has a lot to be proud of when it comes to the REF. Its success in research excellence is not only good for the institutions in the capital but good for the whole UK economy. There is no levelling up, no global Britain, and no science superpower, that does not flow through London. Put simply, the research strength of London is the research strength of the whole country.

REF Results

The sheer size of London means that it can support a thriving research ecosystem. 24.8% of all institutions submitting to the REF were based in London and around 19% of all staff. This is significantly higher than any other region. In combination with the fact that London has 10x the population density of next most dense region of the country the capital has distinct research strengths. It can attract a broader and more international talent pool. It can access labour markets and businesses out of reach other universities. And, it is within greater proximity to the professional services and companies who can support university spin outs.

If all 39 London submissions were submitted as one university it would have an overall quality profile of 46.91% 4* research. This is second only to the East of England where 49.35% of research was 4* or higher. However, this is skewed by the fact that only 9 institutions fit into the East category of which Cambridge is one of them.

40.15% of London's outputs were classed as 4*. Again, this is second only to East of England where 43% of outputs were deemed to be 4*. This is also significantly ahead of the national average where 35.9% of outputs were rated 4*.

In Impact, London is second again with 55.86% of its impacts rated 4*. Again, this is far ahead of the national average of 49.7%. There were some pockets of truly outstanding results within this aggregate figure. For example, in Main Panel A Roehampton had 100% of their impact measurements rate as 4*.

In research environment London had 59.16% of its submissions rated 4*. This placed it as the highest scoring region ahead of the East of England at 53.7% and the national average of 49.6%. An objectively outstanding result.

In total, London has the densest most diverse submission of any UK region and is demonstrating excellence right across the board. This excellence can also be found right across London in different types of providers. Whether that is London Metropolitan achieving 100% 4* impact in mathematical sciences; Brunel being number one in impact in London for Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences; LSE achieving 100% 4* impact in communication, cultural, and media studies, and library and information management; or Greenwich achieving 75% 4* impact in Chemistry. Simply, excellence can be found everywhere in London.

Interestingly, if you take the overall average of London, East of England, and the South East, then London pulls above their overall 4* quality profile by .3%. It is also the case that a London institution topped 14/34 of the Units of Assessment. This may not lead to a huge uplift in QR funding, but these results will bolster London's overall research standing.

Policy Ideas

In total, it has been a strong REF showing for London with a lot to be proud of. This then asks the obvious question of what now? In looking at the wider government and policy landscape there are a few areas for London universities to consider in their work, narratives, and public engagement:

- **Levelling Up:** Levelling up fits uneasy with London. There has been a misguided virtue that somehow moving funding around for its own sake without clear economic reasoning is good research policy. There are perhaps three areas for London universities to consider. The first is how London universities research strengths support an international agenda which in turn contribute to levelling up. The second is how research supports the strength of London's economy which in turn provides the resource to distribute in the first place. The third is making more of the work going on by London universities in other parts of the UK, and by universities in other parts of the country in London.
- **London Alone?:** The Golden Train/Golden V/Loxbridge has become a planning portmanteau to mean both research excellence and the place which has already had significant public funding for research. London has opportunity to develop a consistent message of its own research excellence, perhaps starting with the 14 UOA it topped, and join this into a wider message of why London is a great place to live, learn, and work. This could be about shaping the international strategy around this message, leaning more into regional collaborations, or developing some shared London talking points which can be used with ministers, investors, and civic stakeholders. Granted, the complexity of London makes this task more difficult.
- **Culture and the Arts:** London has brilliant cultural artefacts. It has an unrivalled selection of museums, galleries, concert halls, and lots more in between. It also has significant research strengths across a whole range of UOA associated to the arts. This is at a time where the funding for these areas is under threat owing to changing funding hypothecations, changing capital expenditure planning, and squeezes on the overall unit of resource. There is a potentially fascinating piece of work in quantifying how London's universities contribute to the capital's cultural life and in doing so demonstrate the economic and cultural value of this work, and in turn defend their academic importance more generally.

Further Information:

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