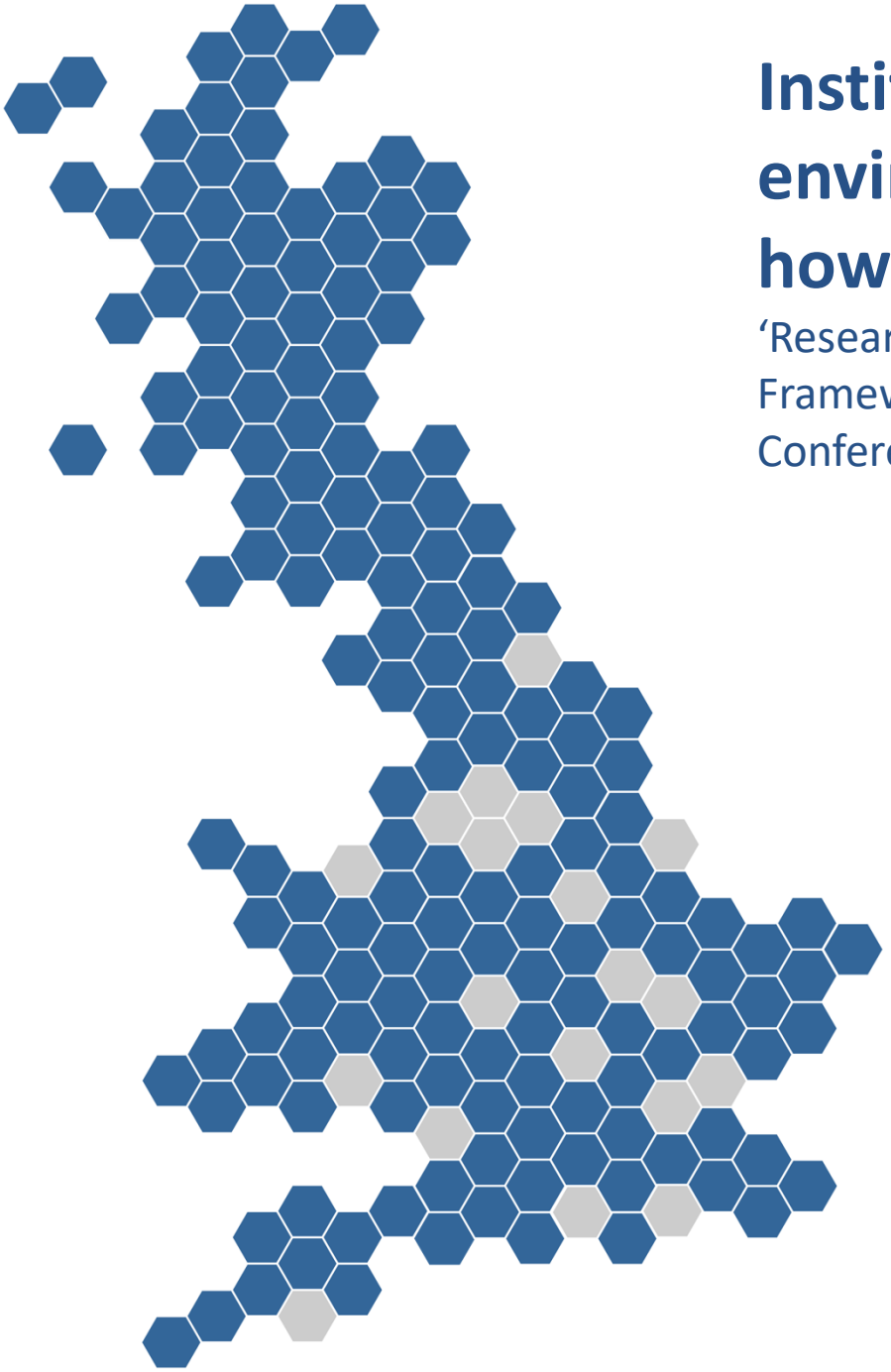

Institutional-level impact and environment: what is it and how should we assess it?

'Research Impact: Strengthening the Excellence Framework', Open Forum, Manchester Conference Centre, 14 September 2017

Tom Frostick

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(Research, Innovation and International)

University Alliance

Making the difference

University Alliance – who are we?

- Group of higher education institutions in England and Wales
- We educate a quarter of the student population
- Employ one in seven researchers in UK higher education
- Fifth of UK research teams undertaking world-leading research in allied health, general engineering, and art and design
- Research power increased by 27% between RAE 2008 and 2014
- Anchor institutions, heavily engaged with industry and the professions

Focus of talk

Institutional-level impact and environment: what is it and how should we assess it?

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Specific points of focus

- Stern Review intentions on institutional-level assessment
- Concerns over institutional-level assessment of impact
- Concerns over institutional-level assessment of environment
- HEFCE's latest announcements (September 2017)
- The future – what should we expect from institutional-level case studies?
- Conclusions

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What do we like about assessing research impact and environment?

University Alliance supports the impact and environment elements of the REF. Research impact assessment helps to:

- Promote public engagement in science
- Highlight the value of research to society and the economy (and indeed to government…)
- Showcase exciting work that attracts students to academia

Assessment of environment meanwhile:

- Rewards investment in people and research facilities

Stern Review on institutional-level assessment (1/2)

Stern Review (2016) recommended:

"Institutions should be given more flexibility to showcase their interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts by submitting 'institutional' level impact case studies, part of a new institutional level assessment.

"This innovation will require careful testing and we recommend that the funding bodies explore options for piloting the institutional level assessment…"

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Stern Review on institutional-level assessment (2/2)

The intellectual basis for institutional-level assessment:

- Better reward inter- and multi- disciplinary and collaborative work
- Give a more holistic view of an institution's activities and strategies
- Avoid duplication of content from unit-level environment statements

So far, so good, but…

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Institutional-level assessment of impact: concerns

- Risks creating a ‘size matters’ scenario where institutions with the biggest stories to tell have a natural advantage.
- Could mask pockets of excellence
- Certain to be limited in scope? (i.e. won’t cover all Units of Assessment?)
- Not yet an agreed definition
- Who is best placed to sit on the institutional-level panel?
- Already assessable at unit-level?

Institutional-level assessment of environment: concerns

- Again, risks creating a ‘size matters’ scenario
- Invites unjust comparisons between very different types of institution – whether an institution’s environment is fit for purpose is surely the critical question?
- To address the duplication issue, a new field could be introduced at the unit level which enables participants to reference an institutional strategy with no separate weighting

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HEFCE's latest announcements (September 2017)

For good summary, see: http://socialscienceresearchfunding.co.uk/?p=1005

Environment

- To justify maintaining environment profile at 15%, UoA environment section will be expanded to include: structures to support interdisciplinary research; supporting collaboration with "organisations beyond higher education"; impact template will now be in the environment element; approach to open research/open access; supporting equality and diversity
- More quantitative data in environment (not specified) and non-assessed **invitation-only pilot for institutional-level environment statement**

Impact

- Output weighting reduced to 60%, impact increased to 25%
- Interdisciplinary member on each sub-panel
- **Institutional-level impact to be piloted but not assessed.**
- Unifying definitions of impact between REF and the Research Councils
- 2* (or higher) for underpinning research
- Impact on teaching to be counted – guidance will follow
- Similar number of case studies to REF 2014

Is institutional-level assessment necessary?

HEFCE will pilot institutional-level assessment of impact and environment but is also planning to:

- Bolster environment content at unit-level
- Increase impact weighting and broaden definitions
- Introduce interdisciplinary members on sub-panels and interdisciplinary identifiers

…With these elements in place, will we need institutional-level assessment to fulfil Stern's intentions?

The future – what should we expect from institutional-level case studies?

- Credible path from underpinning research to impact
- Clear guidance from HEFCE on definitions
- Guidance on scope and breadth – how many Units of Assessment need to feature?
- What about activities involving multiple institutions? Can these be submitted by more than one partner?
- Pilots should be representative of the sector

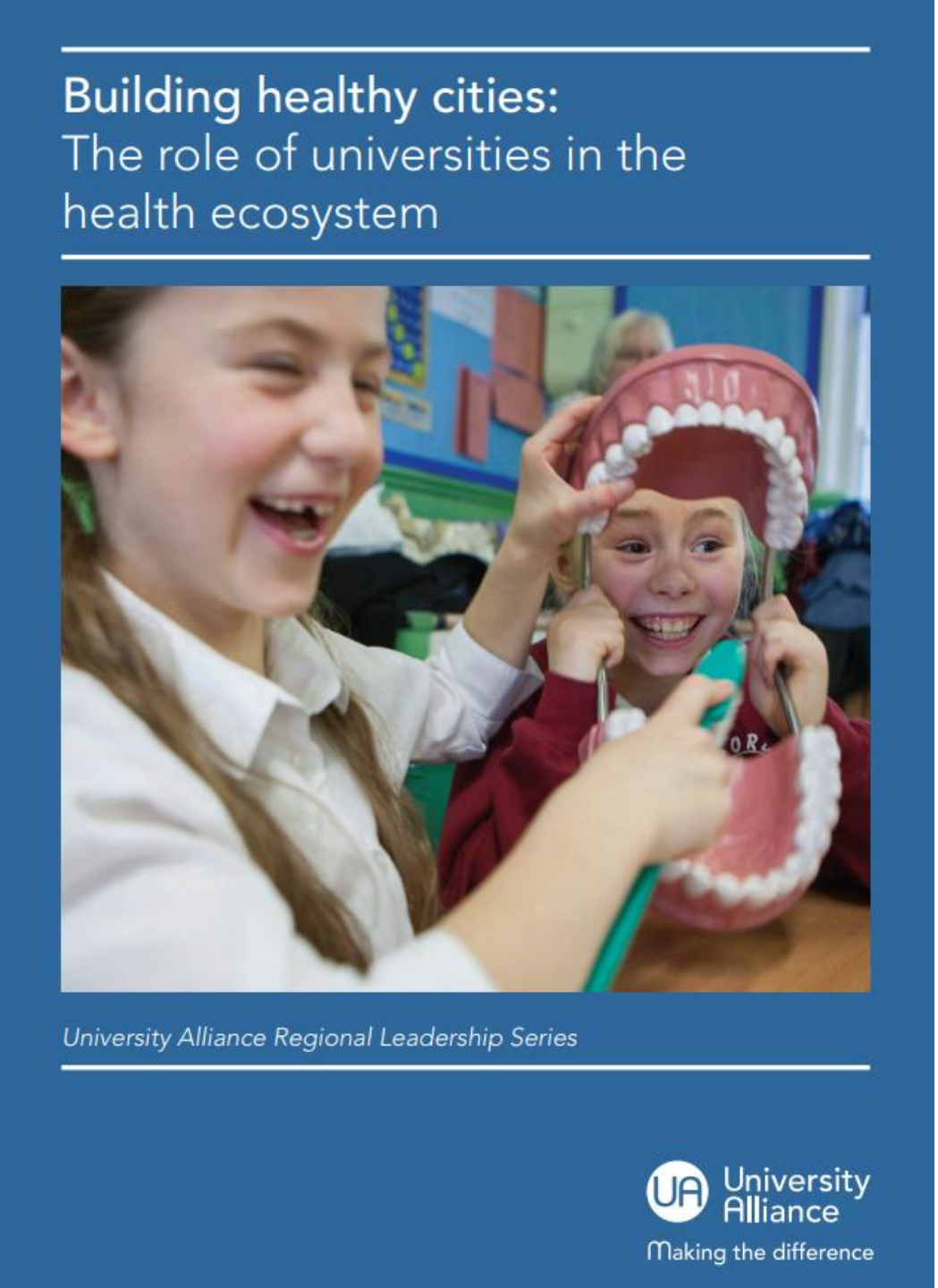
Potential case study 1: Industry Collaboration Zones

The **University of Salford** has established four multi-disciplinary Industry Collaboration Zones (ICZs) in Digital and Creative; Engineering and Environments; Sport; and Health, Wellbeing and Society.

Closely linked to the industry needs of the region and embedded across the university.

One of the goals by 2021 is to ensure Salford's "research and enterprise activities are grounded in the needs of industry and contribute to meeting a range of global challenges".

See http://www.salford.ac.uk/icz



Potential case study 2: Bristol Health Economy

UWE Bristol and the **University of Bristol** are collaborating with NHS Trusts, Bristol City Council and others to integrate the health and care community of the West of England.

Bristol Health Partners (BHP) focuses on the application of clinical research as well as public and population health.

BHP Health Integration Teams focus on everything from reducing the number of suicides and self-harm episodes in the Bristol City Region to achieving the best quality of life for dementia patients and their families through public and patient involvement and research.

Conclusions

- Institutional-level assessment is fraught with difficulties
- HEFCE is already building incentives for interdisciplinarity into the next REF – possibly removing the need for institutional-level assessment…
- …but if the forthcoming pilots go well, we have until 2028(?) to come up with an appropriate methodology. A decade is a decent length of time to get this right.

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