Every five or six years since 1986, the UK reviews and evaluates the research undertaken by its universities. This exercise provides critical information that helps the government allocate public money for research and provides accountability for how that money is spent — as well as allowing the higher-education sector to benchmark its institutions.

The evaluation process is run by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of the four regional funding bodies for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In the past, the evaluation procedure focused mainly on the quality of academic output. However, in 2010, the government asked us to include an assessment of the impact of publicly funded research outside the academic sector. The result was the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

As part of the new system, institutions described a selection of their research that has had the most wide-reaching effects on society and the economy. There were 6,975 such impact case studies submitted, and it took the best part of a year for panels of academic and non-academic experts to assess them. The results were published in December 2014, complementing the more-traditional assessments of the quality of research outputs and of the research environment (www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/201401).

“The exercise has been a tremendous success.”

The exercise has been a tremendous success. All UK institutions and all disciplines — from the sciences to the arts and humanities — were judged to produce both high-quality research outputs and have great impact. UK research was shown to benefit the economy, society, culture, policy, health, the environment and quality of life — both within the UK and overseas. These wider effects are mostly the fruits of multidisciplinary work and reflect how well universities have engaged with a range of public, private and charitable organizations — as well as local communities.

This supplement draws out some of the overarching themes of these impact case studies, and highlights the results of a selection of the best of UK research. By articulating the benefits of academic study to society, the REF makes a strong case for continued — or increased — spending on research in UK universities.