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9 March 2021

Responsible uses of research metrics

Dear Professor Whyte,

Thank you and colleagues for your letter of 1 March 2021, addressed to me in my capacity as Chair of the UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics (FRRM), drawing our attention to your concerns relating to the proposed usage by the University of Liverpool of two quantitative indicators of research performance as the basis of a process for compulsory redundancies.

I should note first that the FRRM has no statutory or regulatory authority, nor any mechanism of enforcement across UK higher education and research. Established in 2016, following *The Metric Tide* review, the Forum is an advisory, advocacy and support body which works to advance responsible uses of metrics in research through a mix of evidence, exhortation and example.¹ Therefore, we are not in a position to investigate this case, or to comment on a particular university's policies, as these are matters for their governance as autonomous institutions.

Having said that, let me offer the following observations on behalf of the FRRM:

Building on related initiatives, including the *San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)* and the *Leiden Manifesto*, the 2015 *Metric Tide* review—that led to the establishment of the FRRM—proposed a framework for responsible metrics usage in terms of five dimensions:²

- **Robustness:** basing metrics on the best possible data in terms of accuracy and scope;
- **Humility:** recognising that quantitative evaluation should support – but not supplant – qualitative, expert assessment;
- **Transparency:** keeping data collection and analytical processes open and transparent, so that those being evaluated can test and verify the results;
- **Diversity:** accounting for variation by field, and using a range of indicators to reflect and support a plurality of research and researcher career paths across the system;
- **Reflexivity:** recognising and anticipating the systemic and potential effects of indicators, and updating them in response.

This earlier work has since been supplemented by broader development of definitions and criteria for responsible research assessment (RRA)—for example through a recent partnership between the FRRM, UKRI and the Global Research Council.³

¹ The FRRM's terms of reference can be found here: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/research-policy/open-science/Documents/Terms%20of%20Reference%20-UK%20Forum%20for%20Responsible%20Research%20Metrics%20updated%20November%202018.pdf>

² For more details, see: <https://re.ukri.org/sector-guidance/publications/metric-tide/>

³ See, for example: <https://www.globalresearchcouncil.org/news/responsible-research-assessment/>; and https://rori.figshare.com/articles/report/The_changing_role_of_funders_in_responsible_research_assessment_progress_obstacles_and_the_way_ahead/13227914

Looking across the FRRM's work to date, that of related initiatives, and the extensive international evidence base on which these draw, one of the clearest points of consensus is that any narrow set of specific indicators of individual performance (including average research income or Field Weighted Citation Impact) cannot provide a methodologically rigorous, fair or responsible basis on which to evaluate or assess individual research performance.

Whilst it is not the FRRM's place to comment on the employment practices of individual HEIs, as we believe that is a matter for their governance as autonomous institutions, we would advise against any disproportionate reliance on such indicators in hiring, promotion or redundancy processes, which would contravene well-established principles of responsible use.

Relying on any database (including Scopus) as a sole source of citation data may also be problematic, given the limitations in coverage. To quote from one recent review:

"Although the providers of Scopus (Elsevier) and Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics) claim to be increasingly covering the world's scientific and scholarly literature comprehensively, both products are selective in practice as well as in principle...Although the coverage of Scopus is somewhat broader than that of Web of Science, all comparisons, including our own in this study, demonstrate a large overlap and indicate the same pattern of deficiencies when it comes to the social sciences and humanities, and the coverage of literatures in other languages than English." (Aksnes and Sivertsen, 2019)⁴

In the FRRM, we welcome growing signs that the sector is taking responsible uses of metrics seriously in the context of building a diverse and inclusive research culture. The focus needs to move to implementation—testing, identifying and sharing what works in building a healthy and productive research culture.

We hope that a fair and evidence-informed resolution of the present difficulties in your organisation will be reached, in the interests of all those who share a commitment to building a dynamic, responsible, inclusive and diverse research culture in the UK.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Max Lu, Chair FRRM, signed on behalf of the FRRM members.

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/research-policy/open-science/Pages/forum-for-responsible-research-metrics.aspx>

⁴ Dag W. Aksnes, Gunnar Sivertsen (2019). A criteria-based assessment of the coverage of Scopus and Web of Science. *Journal of Data and Information Science*. Vol. 4 No. 1, 2019 pp 1–21. DOI: 10.2478/jdis-2019-0001. [https://content.sciendo.com/configurable/contentpage/journals\\$002fdis\\$002f4\\$002f1\\$002farticle-p1.xml](https://content.sciendo.com/configurable/contentpage/journals$002fdis$002f4$002f1$002farticle-p1.xml).