

# Integrating efficiency within research grants: should we start on our own turf?

Grant funding bodies and the institutions they finance are increasingly held to account over how they spend public funds. This means spending more efficiently, responsibly and transparently, in order to support and sustain long term research. Although grants are mostly awarded based on directly incurred costs of the research project (equipment, consumables, staff salaries etc.), universities are expected to make evident that they are considering the full economic cost (fEC) of research. This includes indirect costs such as human resources, finance services and estates/infrastructure, which are often provided in part by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Thus, universities must demonstrate that they're protecting the public interest and public investment with regards to Higher Education. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects) absorb a higher proportion of funding, therefore shouldn't this be the focus of our sustainability and efficiency efforts, and shouldn't we want our researchers to get on board?

## Is the research good value for money and is it sustainable?

Assessments such as the controversial Research Excellence Framework (REF) already burden academics and detract from their primary objective of conducting research. The REF examines the impact of research outputs on global society and the environment, it also demands evidence of the sustainability of the research environment and its contribution to the wider research base. In essence, it's a way of measuring research quality to ensure that funding goes to deserving research, is managed properly, and is 'value for money'. The University of Bristol ranked 9th in the UK (2014) for producing 'world-leading' research, demonstrating that such frameworks can be beneficial in attracting high quality staff and students, guiding HEFCE on how to allocate its ~£1.6bn of annual public funds, and attracting grants from funding bodies for direct research costs.

The REF doesn't ask for the full economic cost of research, but rather focuses on outputs and international influence. If it did, researchers might be under more pressure to consider the indirect costs (and environmental impact) of their research, rather than the responsibility lying mostly with the 'university'. On the other hand, the academic community has an ever-increasing administrative burden, with increasingly lengthy and convoluted grant applications. If the onus was on researchers to not only operate sustainably, but evidence it as well, one could argue this is just more unnecessary red tape. HEFCE already ensures that universities in receipt of capital funding demonstrate an institutional commitment to reduce their carbon emissions. It's possible that in future, research grant funding bodies could ask the same of researchers.

Professional services and Senior Management in universities only have limited influence over environmental sustainability, using policy tools, strategic management and infrastructure improvements. To become a truly sustainable and carbon neutral university, we need the academic community to conduct research in line with this philosophy, in line with our institutional [Vision and Strategy](#). To encourage a change in culture, maybe we could incentivise researchers with additional grant funding for their sustainability efforts? This is less regulatory than including sustainability within mandatory grant conditions, and uses more 'carrot' than 'stick'.

We put forward this concept to Research Councils UK (RCUK) and the Wellcome Trust. The Wellcome Trust has a relatively new sustainability initiative which is part of their broader '[Our Planet, Our Health](#)' funding scheme. They are looking to drive innovation and influence policy on a global scale, by looking at links between environmental and human health. Offering additional grant funding for a 'research efficiency and sustainability accreditation' would encourage uptake in the academic community, and they're very open to exploring this.

## **How sustainability in Higher Education is currently measured**

There are a variety of league tables, management systems and accreditations that aim to measure sustainability in HEIs around the world. The most internationally recognised standard is ISO 14001, which assists organisations in reducing their environmental impact, comply with laws and regulations, improve resource efficiency and drive down costs. Bristol holds this standard, achieving it through the implementation of an [Environmental Management System \(EMS\)](#). There are also many institution-wide league tables such as People & Planet and Brite Green, although the accuracy and reliability of such comparative lists has been [called into question](#).

Currently, most systems that try and quantify or accredit sustainability in HE only applies at the organisational level. Whereas environmental frameworks such as [Green Impact Labs](#) are designed for individual research groups. Green Impact Labs is in its pilot year in the current format, and is not ready to be included into grant applications (as either grant conditions or additional funding). The Laboratory Efficiency Action Network (LEAN), which is a group of UK HEI sustainable labs professionals, is working to improve the framework, by adding benchmarking, quantitative baselining and measurable continual improvements.

Maybe, just maybe, the collaboration between LEAN and the Wellcome Trust could lead to a national sustainability accreditation for labs. Let us not only impact our global environment with our [research](#), but let's lead by example and get sustainable on our own turf.

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