The REF and Educational Research

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Some headings

1. REF 2014 and 2021: Mainly similar, with some differences
2. Education submissions in REF 2021
3. The sub-panel and how they worked
4. Education outcomes in REF 2021 (with some comparison to 2014)
5. REF compared to other quality assessment processes
6. Investment in education research
7. Concluding thoughts

1. REF 2014 and 2021: mainly similar

- Continuity of criteria and approach
- Some changes in subpanel number/coverage
- ‘De-coupling’ (i.e., the shift to FTE x 2.5 outputs)
- Assessment period: six years in REF 2014, seven years in REF 2021

- Many of same limitations or problems remain
- HOWEVER there are also many aspects that deserve more appreciation than they often get, i.e., ‘reasons to be cheerful’

Under-appreciated features of REF

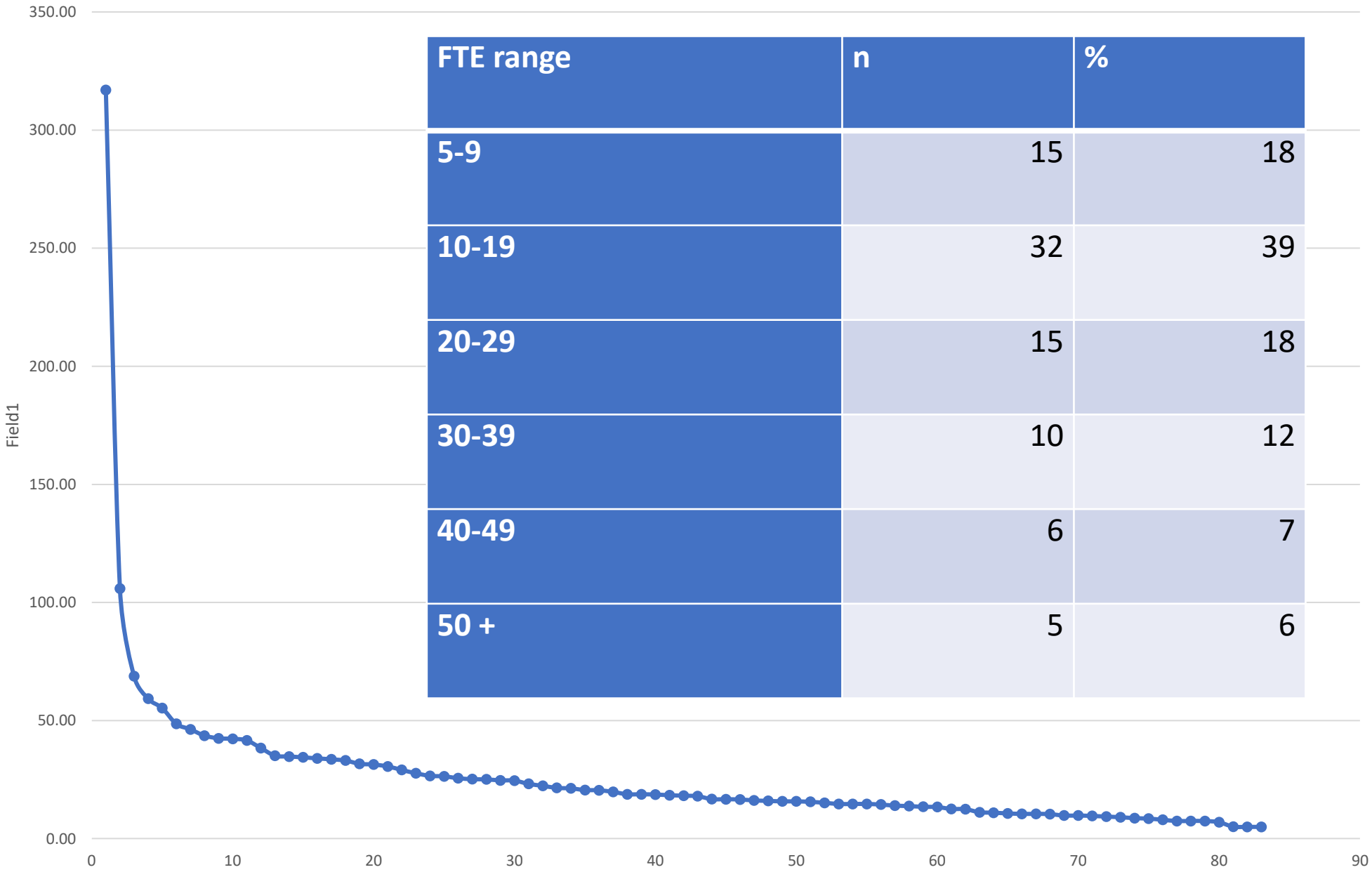
- High degree of continuity as well as development
- Rules and process subject to extensive, genuine consultation
- Embodies serious attempts to minimize gaming
- Positively bureaucratic, avoidance of conflicts of interest
- Robust expert peer review by sector-nominated individuals

Compared to most other mechanisms for quality assessment across a range of education and wider public services, REF is **highly distinctive.** I will return to this point.

2. Education submissions in REF 2021

- 83 institutions submitted (75 in REF 2014)
- 2,367 individual researchers (up 47% on REF 2014)
- 5,278 outputs, 232 impact case studies, 83 environment statements
- Of the 83 HEIs: 68 in England (83.5% of FTE); nine in Scotland (11.1%); three in Wales (2.9%); three in Northern Ireland (2.5%)
- Education submissions show external income over the whole assessment period of £386 million (annual average £55 million – down from £58 million in REF 2014)
- 6,155 doctoral degrees awarded (increase of 70% on REF 2014)

Size of submissions to REF 2021 UoA 23 Education



FTE range	n	%
5-9	15	18
10-19	32	39
20-29	15	18
30-39	10	12
40-49	6	7
50 +	5	6

3. The sub-panel: composition

- Sub-panel membership of 35 (22 full members, five impact assessors and eight output assessors) plus subpanel advisor and administrative support See https://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/panel-membership/
- All appointments derived from nominations
- There were 192 nominations for the Education sub-panel, pertaining to 162 individuals. BERA was the most frequent nominating body, with 58
- Selection from nominees made by Chair and Deputy, taking into account:
  - Anticipated requirements from the 'survey of submission intentions'
  - Areas of expertise, and experience in peer review and quality assessment
  - Gender, ethnicity
  - Institutional location/background
  - Country location

The sub-panel: key aspects of process

- The Nolan principles
- Constantly seeking to minimise unconscious bias
- Avoiding conflicts of interest
- Reading everything
- Calibration across main panel C and within sub-panel
- Allocation
- Assessment
- Ongoing moderation – in pairs, between groups and across the sub-panel
- Collective responsibility
- International comparison
- ‘Rigorous generosity’

4. Education outcomes in REF

2021	4*	3*	2*	1*	U
Output	29.8	38.1	23.7	7.6	0.8
Impact	51.1	29.0	14.3	4.8	0.8
Environment	45.1	27.5	17.1	9.9	0.4
Overall	**37**	**35**	**20**	**7**	**1**

2014	4*	3*	2*	1*	U
Output	21.7	39.9	29.5	7.8	1.1
Impact	42.9	33.6	16.7	6.0	0.8
Environment	48.4	25.0	18.1	7.8	0.7
Overall	**30**	**36**	**26**	**7**	**1**

Outputs

	4*	3*	2*	1*	U
2021	29.8	38.1	23.7	7.6	0.8
2014	21.7	39.9	29.5	7.8	1.1

There was an increase in the proportion of outputs judged to be world-leading (4*), rising from 21.7% in 2014 to 29.8% in 2021.The proportion scoring 3* and 4* combined rose from 61.6% in 2014 to 67.9% in 2021.

Sub-panel's summary of outputs assessment

- Outputs gaining the highest grades demonstrated their originality, significance and rigour **in diverse ways**;
- Outputs gaining the highest grades included qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies, and there was **no strong association between research excellence and particular methods or approaches**;
- Outputs gaining the highest grades included **theoretically** driven as well as **empirically** driven work;
- Outputs directly concerned with aspects of **professional practice** gained grades **across the whole range**, though those gaining lower grades included some that were limited to descriptive or experiential accounts;
- Whilst clearly of value, lower-graded outputs were often characterised by one or more of the following: over-claiming of contribution to knowledge; weak location in a field; insufficient attention to the justification of samples or case selection; under-development of criticality and analytical purchase.

Impact

	4*	3*	2*	1*	U
2021	51.1	29.0	14.3	4.8	0.8
2014	42.9	33.6	16.7	6.0	0.8

There was a significant increase in the proportion of impact assessed as outstanding, from 42.9% (2014) to 51.1% (2021). The combined proportion of impact judged to be very considerable (3*) and outstanding (4*) rose from 76.5% (2014) to 80.1% (2021).

Sub-panel's summary of impact assessment

A range of impressive impact case studies confirmed that UK-based educational research is having a positive influence on the quality of life of individuals, organisations and communities locally, nationally and internationally.

The strongest case studies:

- Provided a succinct summary of the impact which clearly related to the structure of the rest of the template so that the narrative was strong and coherent;
- Ensured that the relationship between the underpinning research and impact claims was clearly articulated;
- Ensured that all claims made were supported by robust evidence, and where appropriate, used testimonials judiciously to support claims made;
- Stated not only the way in which the research had impacted on the specific area in question, but also provided a convincing demonstration of both reach and significance.

Environment

	4*	3*	2*	1*	U
2021	45.1	27.5	17.1	9.9	0.4
2014	48.4	25.0	18.1	7.8	0.7

Although 14 of the 83 submissions (17%) were from institutions that had not submitted in REF 2014, there was general continuity in the overall environment profile.

There was a small decrease in the proportion judged as conducive to producing world-leading research (4*) (45.1%, compared to 48.4% in 2014).However, the proportion of 3* and 4* combined remained almost the same (72.6%, compared to 73.4% in 2014).

Sub-panel's summary: environment assessment

The strongest submissions:

- Provided convincing statements pertaining to strategy, vision, and values, which were then carried through all elements of the document, making a coherent narrative;
- Articulated how far the research objectives from the previous period had been addressed and presented a strong and appropriately ambitious set of objectives for the future;
- Made clear how the research strategy had informed all aspects of the unit's work and supported claims with evidence such as the inclusion of specific examples;
- Were analytical and not just descriptive in relation to EDI, and paid attention to a range of characteristics;
- Provided a strong and convincing account of how researchers featured in the submission had contributed to the discipline

Potentially useful comparisons…

Education was one of 12 UoAs in Main Panel C (MPC)

It had the 2nd largest number of submissions and the 3rd largest FTE (2168).

Overall quality profiles show Education to have exactly the MPC average of 4* quality, at 37%. However, Education has below average 3* (35%, cf. 43%) and above average 1* (7%, cf. 3%).

On outputs, Education's 4* is in the lowest quartile in MPC. It is the same as UoA 13, and greater than UoAs 20 and 24, and close to UoA 17.

Education 4* impact is significantly above MPC average (51.1%, cf. 44.8%). Together, 3* & 4* impact is a little below MPC average (80.1%, cf. 84.3%).

At 6155 Doctoral Awards, Education is the by far the most 'productive' in MPC (and in volume, second only to UoA 17).

5. REF and TEF compared

Aspect	REF	TEF
Assessment criteria	Explicit, mainly consistent over time	Implicit, no shared definition, almost constant evolution
Purpose	To measure quality to inform resource allocation, accountability and benchmarking	To facilitate a more dynamic market across higher education institutions
Assessor engagement	Mainly direct	Almost entirely indirect (e.g., no direct attempt to measure the quality of teaching! – Ashwin 2022)
Assessment 'epistemology'	Mainly criterion-referenced, strong reliance on expertise. No norm-related constraints on scoring	Metrics selected by government agencies rather than experts (see RSS, ONS). Strong norm-referencing (limited number of 'Golds' available)
Unit of analysis	Clear, and with high congruence to (or compatibility and intelligibility with) most institutional structures	At odds with purpose. Teaching quality is centred on programmes/courses, so an institutional award of Gold is at best distant from students, at worst irrelevant.
Legitimacy	Expert peer review & bureaucracy, measures what it says it measures. High validity	Institutional case-making and indirect proxy data. Slender connection to Q of teaching. Low validity

6. Investment in Educational Research

- Firstly, a point of comparison – investment in healthcare research.
- Pre-pandemic, annual public expenditure on healthcare across the UK was £225 billion (about 10% of GDP) (ONS, 2021).
- In REF, healthcare research mainly appears in UoAs 1-3 (Clinical Medicine; Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care; Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing, Pharmacy) though also forms substantial segments of UoA4 (Psychology, Psychiatry, Neurosciences) and UoA5 (Biological Sciences).
- Collectively, UoAs 1-3 show annual research income of £2278 million.
- £2278 million is 0.0101 **(i.e., 1 per cent)** of £225 billion. If we include a conservative amount of the research income in UoAs 4 & 5, this rises to **about 1.2 per cent.**

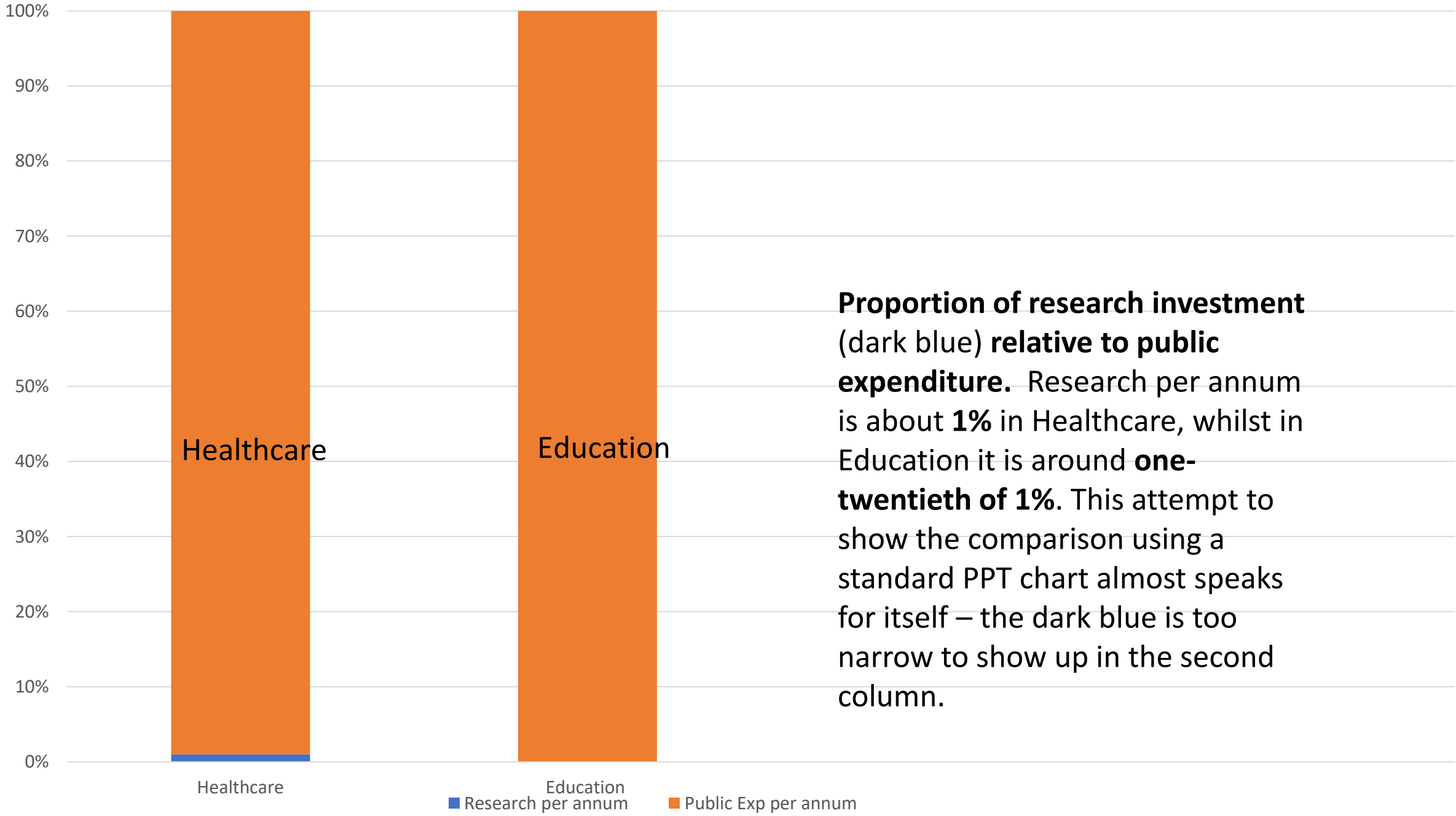
Research funding - Investment in educational research

‘Before the pandemic, total spending on education in the UK stood at £104 billion or 4.4% of national income in 2019–20’

(Institute for Fiscal Studies 2021 *Annual Report on Education* https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15858)

The total research income evidenced in REF2021 for Educational research shows an annual average of £55 million.

£55million is 0.00053 **(or 0.053 per cent, or about 1/20th of one per cent)** of £104 billion. In other words, it would need to be 20 times bigger (around £1100 million) to match even a conservative estimate of the rate of recent investment in healthcare research (relative to total public expenditure).



Proportion of research investment (dark blue) **relative to public expenditure.** Research per annum is about **1%** in Healthcare, whilst in Education it is around **one-twentieth of 1%**. This attempt to show the comparison using a standard PPT chart almost speaks for itself – the dark blue is too narrow to show up in the second column.

7. Concluding thoughts (a)

The sub-panel noted three matters they felt to be fundamental to the future health, sustainability, and vibrancy of the discipline:

1. Concerns about the nature and general level of research investment. An average of £58 million p.a. in REF 2014, to £55 million in REF 2021…'the sub-panel noted that £55 million is a very small amount in the context of annual public spending on education and that there has been a decline in major national programmed funding', (and also in international opportunities).
2. While there were notable exceptions, little of the research seen focused on educational engagements with climate change, or on education for environmental sustainability.

Concluding thoughts (b)

3. REF provides ‘strong evidence that educational research has impressive national and international reach and responds well to the needs of policy, relevant professional groups, the public and specific communities’.

‘Crucially, however, the best educational research is not confined to the role of a supplier responding to demands that are articulated by - or on behalf of - these stakeholders: educational research is also itself a vital source of new ideas, insights, perspectives, and challenges to current thinking, policy and practice, making a valuable and distinctive contribution to democratic life’.

To quote Geoff Whitty

‘Good educational research helps people reconsider issues, it helps them think differently, it helps them reconceptualise what the problem is and how prevalent it is, it helps them discard some old assumptions, it punctures old myths’.

Inaugural BERA Presidential address, 2005

(Whitty, 2006: 170)