

WGSSS Impact Competition: Applicant Guidance 2026/27

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1. Overview

1.1 Competition aims

The WGSSS Impact competition aims to encourage students to plan and deliver meaningful impact and engagement across the WGSSS student community and the wider public through their research activities.

The competition gives WGSSS students across the network an opportunity to:

- Reflect on how their research has, or will, make a meaningful difference in and beyond their own research field.
- Inspire further impact, through follow-on funding for winning projects.

1.2 Defining ‘impact’

WGSSS defines impact using the terms of the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council). Entries should show a clear, evidenced impact consistent with the ESRC definition:

- Impact must be a demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy, including benefits to individuals, organisations, or nations.
- Impact may be academic, economic, or societal, provided the contribution is clearly evidenced.

Submissions should demonstrate at least one of the ESRC-recognised impact types:

Instrumental impact – influencing policy, practice, services, legislation, or behaviour.

Conceptual impact – reframing debates, enhancing understanding of issues.

Capacity building – developing technical or personal skills among participants, users, or communities.

For the purposes of the WGSSS Impact and Engagement Competition, ‘impact’ can include:

- **An effect on, change or benefit to society and the economy.** This includes a positive change on the activity, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding of key beneficiaries.
- **The positive academic contribution that excellent research can make to the understanding and advancement of scientific method or theory across disciplines.** For instance, applicants could submit an application based on their PhD research, an OIV (Overseas Institutional Visit), or a special project such as a cross-institutional collaboration.

Beneficiaries of impact can be:

- A non-academic audience, community, constituency, organisation or individuals.

- An academic audience, community, or consortium.
- Based locally, regionally, or internationally. Although WGSSS students must be registered at a WGSSS University to be eligible for this competition, their impact can take place anywhere in the UK and overseas.

1.3 Pathways to impact

The WGSSS expect applicants for this competition to be at distinct stages on their pathway to impact, and the process is designed to provide applicants with an opportunity to reflect on what they are planning to achieve, what they have achieved so far, and what could come next with some follow-on funding. To reflect on where you are in your impact journey and participate in this competition, you can start by identifying:

1. The outputs that have been realised (or that you are planning to realise in the next years of your PhD).
 2. The outcomes that have been achieved (or that you are planning to realise in the next years of your PhD).
 3. The impact that has already been realised (or has the potential to be realised in the future).
- Additionally, if you do not have one already, you may wish to draw up a logic model for your project. For instance, the model in Figure 1, originally designed as a planning tool, can be useful for evaluation as well.

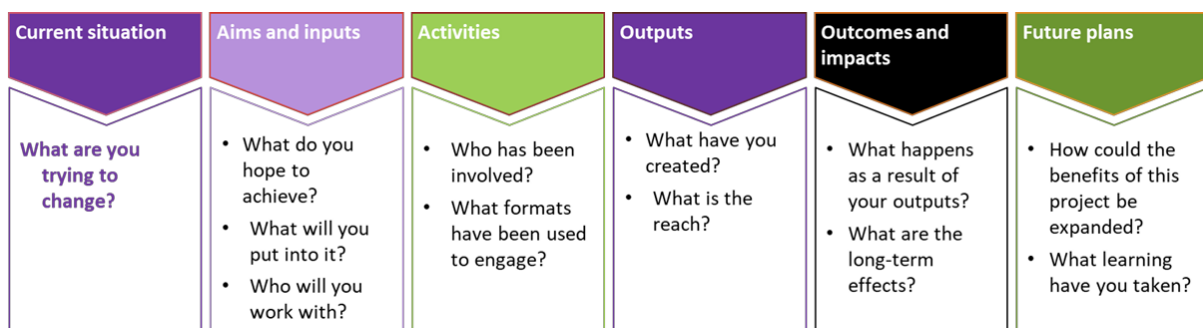


Figure 1: Pathways to Impact diagram. Logic model adapted from the National Centre for Coordinating Public Engagement: <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/> NB The key caveat to using a logic model to plan/evaluate impact is that it can suggest the process is linear. It is also worth considering that, in a truly collaborative project, engagement with stakeholders (those you are seeking to benefit or persuade, for example) may be embedded all the way through and can change the shape of the project.

1.4 Measuring impact

Ideally, applications would include a combination of various kinds of evidence to demonstrate the well-rounded and continuing impacts of the project. You can include evidence of impact that you had planned, and evidence of unanticipated impacts that arose as you went through the project, for example, positive feedback from stakeholders that you had not initially planned to engage.

The WGSSS accepts the following evidence as part of the Impact Competition:

- Quantitative evidence
- Qualitative evidence
- Information about short-term, medium-term and long-term impacts
- Information about impacts that have been achieved, or that are yet to be realised

For advice on quantitative measures for impact, we would recommend RAND Europe's Guidance for standardising quantitative indicators of impact within REF case studies (2018). Commissioned by HEFCE, this document provides an overview of some standard measures for quantifying impact, based on the 2014 REF case study submissions.

A graphic summarising some of their top tips is below in Figure 2.

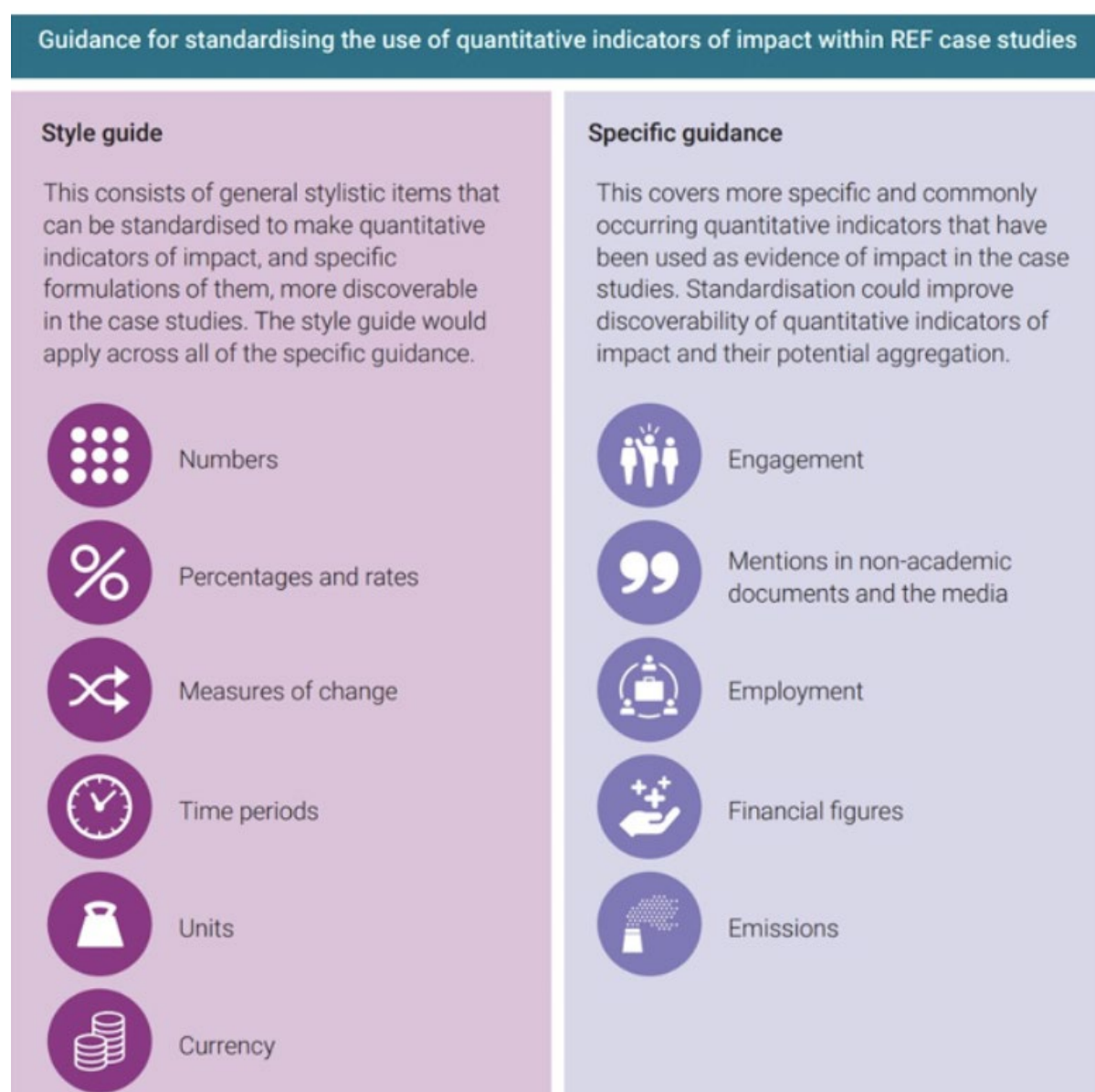


Figure 2: Guidance for quantitative indicators of impact. Sarah Parks, Becky Ioppolo, Martin Stepanek and Salil Gunashekar, Guidance for standardising quantitative indicators of impact

within REF case studies, Cambridge: Rand Europe, 2018 Further helpful information about planning and measuring your impact can be found in the ESRC's Impact Toolkit for Economic and Social Sciences here: [Impact toolkit for economic and social sciences – UKRI](#)

2. The application process

2.1 Eligibility

The WGSSS Impact Competition is open to all WGSSS-funded students. It is understood that, depending on where you are with your PhD, you will be at a different stage of your journey to create impact. To allow for this, there are two categories for the WGSSS Impact Competition:

1. Planned Impact: Applications are open for any student in their first year of PhD study (or part-time equivalent). Please note: students in their second or third year are not eligible to submit under the Planned Impact category.

2. Achieved Impact: Applications are open for any student outside of their first year (or part-time equivalent) but within their maximum funded timeframe (according to their award length).

2.2 Assessment process

There are two rounds of assessment for the WGSSS Impact Competition. Applicants need to commit to participating in both stages of the competition when they complete the initial application form.

Round One: Panel review

- Applicants submit an application via WGSSS. Apply by **Friday 4th September 2026**. The questions you will be asked can be found in Section 4.
- Submissions will be reviewed by a panel comprised of impact leaders and early career academics that are leading innovative impact projects from within the WGSSS academic network.
- Up to four candidates will be shortlisted for each of the two categories, “Planned Impact” or “Achieved Impact”.

Round Two: Peer vote

Applicants that are shortlisted in Round One will progress to Round Two.

In Round Two applicants will be invited to produce a poster to present their submission which should be aimed at a general academic audience. Candidates will be provided with resources and guidance to support them in producing the poster effectively. The posters will be displayed in an online showcase and put to an online vote during October 2026. The winner in each category will be determined by the number of votes received.

The winners of each category will be announced at the 2026 Cohort Induction at Cardiff University. All shortlisted candidates will be invited to attend and to exhibit a hard copy of their poster (printing and expenses covered by WGSSS) and discuss their work with fellow guests.

2.3 Assessment criteria

The table below details the specific assessment criteria for each category.

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	CATEGORY 1 Planned Impact	CATEGORY 2 Achieved Impact
Focus on	✓ Planned and expected impact that is intended to develop in the next years of the PhD	✓ Achieved and ongoing impact
Scale and significance	✓ What outputs are planned and what are the likely benefits for different stakeholders? ✓ Are these outputs feasible given current plans? Would they be supported by follow-on funding?	✓ What were the outputs of the project, and how far-reaching are the benefits for different stakeholders? ✓ What are the opportunities to expand the existing benefits for key stakeholders through the follow-on funding?
Relationship between researcher and impact	✓ How clear are the potential links between the research planned or underway and the stated potential impact?	✓ How clear are the links between the underpinning research and the impact? ✓ What opportunities are there for future research and impact as a result of this work?
Clarity and communication	✓ How clearly are the planned outputs, outcomes and impacts of the project articulated? ✓ What consideration has been given to the evidence that will be needed to justify and monitor impact?	✓ How clearly are the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the project articulated? ✓ How effectively is qualitative and/or quantitative evidence used to explain the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the project?

2.4 Application timeline

07/08/2026	Competition Launch
07/09/2026	Stage 1 Deadline (application form)
17/09/2026	Shortlisted applicants notified and invited to create a poster
08/10/2026	Stage 2 Deadline (posters)
12/10/2026	Online Voting opens
23/10/2026	Winners announced at the WGSSS Induction event in Cardiff University

3. Follow-on funding

3.1 Prizes for candidates

This competition aims to inspire future impact and help students further along their pathway to impact through follow-on funding. There is £1000 prize funding in total available for the Impact Competition, split across the two categories. The respective winners of the “Planned Impact” and “Achieved Impact” categories win £500 each, presented in the following ways.

- For the ‘Planned Impact’ category, the prize will be credited to the winner’s Research, Training and Support Grant (RTSG), and will be eligible to be spent to support the delivery of the planned impact.
- For the ‘Achieved Impact’ category, the winner will receive a cash prize as ‘follow-on’ funding to support future activities.

3.2 Using prize money as follow-on funding

The prize money will be paid by WGSSS to the winning researchers following the competition. The funds may be spent at the winner’s discretion; however, suggested uses include:

- Further dissemination of impact based on the project that has taken place.
- A follow-on project that built on the findings and impact of the original project, to develop clear benefits for stakeholders.
- Activities related to furthering the researcher’s impact pathway

Each winner will be asked to share any further impact work achieved following award of this prize via a short report and video for WGSSS dissemination.

4. Application questions (for reference)

These questions are for information only: to apply for the WGSSS Impact Competition, please complete the application form for the applicable category of the competition. Some prospective candidates will prefer to draft their application outside of the online system, so the questions are included below for your reference.

4.1 Application questions for “Planned Impact”

Please write a short summary of the impact and engagement you intend to develop in the next years of your PhD

Please consider the definition of impact in the Impact Competition Guidance

up to 100 words

Please write a description of your research.

This description should outline what your research topic is and how your research underpins the impact you have developed.

up to 500 words

Please write a fuller description of your planned impact and engagement

Creating impact is a journey, and we acknowledge that students will be at different stages on that journey. Consider here your pathway to impact and how you can articulate your potential impacts at this stage. There is more guidance on this in the Impact and Engagement Competition Guidance. If relevant, you can use up to 5 sources to support this statement, which should be referenced as part of the word count.

up to 750 words

How would you use the prize money to further the impact of your research?

Winning applicants will receive £500. Please outline how you could use this to further the impact of your research.

up to 500 words

4.2 Application questions for “Achieved Impact”

Please write a short summary of the impact you have developed so far in your PhD.

Please consider the definition of impact in the Impact Competition Guidance

up to 100 words

Please write a description of your research.

This description should outline what your research topic is and how your research underpins the impact you have developed.

up to 500 words

Please write a description of your impact.

Creating impact is a journey and we acknowledge that students will be at different stages on that journey. Consider here your pathway to impact, and how you can articulate developed and potential impacts at this stage. There is more information about this in the Impact Competition Guidance. If relevant, you can use up to 5 sources to support this statement, which should be referenced as part of the word count.

up to 750 words

How would you use the prize money to further the impact from your research?

Winning applicants will receive £500. Please outline how you could use this as follow-on funding.

up to 500 words