



# **Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework**

A response from the British Academy

**March 2016**

For further information, contact:  
Jonathan Matthews  
Policy Adviser, Higher Education  
+44 (0) 20 7969 5233  
[j.matthews@britac.ac.uk](mailto:j.matthews@britac.ac.uk)

## Introduction

1. The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences (HSS). We welcome the opportunity to respond to Lord Stern's independent review of the REF.
2. During 2015, the Academy consulted its Fellowship for its views on how research assessment should be conducted. This consultation included a survey of all Fellows and selected award holders, followed by three roundtables on the key issues that emerged. These are:
  - a. The need to reduce the burden of the research assessment process on both those submitting to and undertaking the assessment.
  - b. The need to ensure that the behaviours that research assessment encourages are beneficial and not damaging to either academics' careers or the evolution of the research process.
  - c. The importance of developing a mechanism for recognising the 'Impact' or wider benefits of research that is sensitive to disciplinary differences and that has the confidence of both the research community and government.
3. Our response makes the following points which we expand on under the specific questions in the consultation document:
  - a. We welcome the Government's recent commitment to the dual support system and recommend that dual support is enshrined in the governance of Research UK.
  - b. Quantitative indicators alone are not capable of assessing research quality.
  - c. A fundamental reconceptualization of impact is needed – both how it is defined and how it is assessed.
  - d. There is an absolute need to obviate distortion of the research process and damage to research careers that RAE/REF exercises have induced.
  - e. The burden on submitting institutions and on the assessment process should be managed down to reduce the financial costs and also the opportunity costs of REF.
4. The Academy notes that this review comes shortly after the Nurse Review of the Research Councils and the Government green paper *Higher Education: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. In our response to the Green Paper<sup>1</sup>, we emphasised that by not conceiving of the HE and research system as a whole, Government risks developing a system of policy and regulation that runs counter to the ways in which universities operate. We encourage Government to consider the evidence gathered through this call for evidence in combination with that of the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/responsetogov.cfm>

recent Green Paper consultation, and with the recommendations of the Nurse Review.

5. By way of context to our answers, the Academy considers that the three explicit purposes of REF2014 should also apply to REF 2021, viz:
  - a. the allocation of QR according to research excellence;
  - b. to provide accountability to government for the public investment made in research and evidence of its wider benefits;
  - c. for benchmarking the quality of UK research.

**Question 1: What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?**

1. The Academy recommends the following changes to existing process to enable a more efficient and more accurate assessment of research outputs.
2. All staff employed in a submitting institution with research in their contract of employment should be submitted to the REF. Decision-making around which staff to submit to the REF incurs substantial opportunity costs for academics involved in the selection process, diverting time from research. Universities establish levels of research excellence against which to judge the research of individual staff members. This is either hugely burdensome, involving pilot REF exercises, or done on little more than guess work. The outcome of a such selection process is divisive within an institution, can be damaging to individual research careers, and is potentially discriminatory. In addition, partial submissions of researchers subvert the benchmarking role of the REF.
3. The increased burden on assessment panels of institutions submitting all staff with research in their contracts of employment can be managed by sampling the submitted outputs. Sampling is a prime research methodology in many social science subjects and there is much academic expertise on sampling methods in the UK, not least in the Fellowship of the British Academy. A sampling framework might be based in the first instance on a stratified random sample to ensure proportionate numbers of different types of output are assessed. We encourage BIS to commission research on how sampling of research outputs might be undertaken. To carry the essential credibility with both academics and government, the process of sampling would need to be both rigorous and transparent. Post-submission sampling is also a way of reducing down the burden of assessment itself, although a rigorous peer review process remains the gold standard and must be maintained.
4. The Academy is aware that an argument against all staff employed on a research contract being submitted is that universities will move to put some staff on to teaching contracts. This does happen now. Such contractual changes are subject to employment law and are overseen by the HR professional staff of a university under the gaze of trades unions. In combination, these measures give individuals protection against arbitrary re-writing of contracts. Safeguarding of staff in the selection/non selection under current REF rules is weak by comparison.
5. The Academy recognises that it is legitimate for government to require the UK research base to be accountable for the very significant investment that government makes in research. Introducing the measurement of 'Impact' to REF2014 focussed universities on the need for public accountability for funding. It revealed the

substantial work that universities do that brings wider benefits to the economy, society and quality of life in the UK. Many of the challenges of assessing 'Impact' related to the fact that this was the first time it had featured in research assessment and it took universities some time to adjust.

6. Nevertheless, the Academy argues strongly that the definition of 'Impact' should be broadened in order to recognise the different kinds of research impacts and the non-linear nature of the relationship between research and impact. Impact is often achieved through a 'web of influence' rather than a linear progression. 'Impact' as defined in REF2014 implied a 'but for' model of causation which is not applicable to the whole range of wider benefits of research, particularly in HSS. Research that generates and critiques ideas can be long-term and quite diffuse, and not conducive to demonstrating that an outcome happened 'because of' a particular piece of research.
7. Research that has wider benefit needs to be of high quality, but the very rigid tying of 'Impact' to research in REF2014 was unrealistic. It must be possible for impacts achieved by researchers that are based on a body of research, knowledge and expertise, rather than on discrete outputs, to be recognised.
8. In addition, the process of co-production whereby academics work alongside those who might be influenced by the research from the outset, a process which takes place in many HSS disciplines, should be included in any 'Impact' measure.
9. The independent report commissioned by the then Minister of State for Universities and Skills, David (now Lord) Willetts, *The Metrics Tide*<sup>2</sup> clearly demonstrates that using quantitative measures to assess research quality is fraught with danger. A large number of different types of outputs are submitted to the REF, with the portfolio of outputs varying from subject to subject: – from data sets to exhibitions, book chapters to performances, and from papers in refereed journals to long-form publications. *The Metrics Tide* demonstrates that quantitative measures are not yet sufficiently developed to assess quality of all these media.
10. For HSS research and for many of the creative arts, increased use of quantitative indicators would be particularly damaging. Bibliographic databases do not yet offer a universal level of coverage across the disciplinary spread. In particular, data are lacking on chapters, monographs and research published in languages other than English. Citation practices also differ significantly across different disciplines, in such a way that relying on a citations analysis would be misleading in much HSS research. And for the avoidance of doubt, the Academy is a signatory to the San Francisco

---

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/The,Metric,Tide/2015\\_metric\\_tide\\_executive\\_summary\\_and\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/The,Metric,Tide/2015_metric_tide_executive_summary_and_recommendations.pdf)

Declaration on Research Assessment<sup>3</sup>, and is part of a broad consensus that journal impact factors cannot measure the quality of research.

11. A metrics-based assessment exercise would capture outputs in the humanities in such a way that would distort the submissions of a diverse range of institutions: specialist institutions such as the Courtauld Institute of Art or the Royal Academy of Music would be all but 'invisible' to a metrics-based assessment exercise, while around a quarter of the outputs submitted by, for example, University of Cambridge to REF2014 could not be assessed by quantitative indicators.

**Question 2: If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?**

12. The REF has the important additional functions of providing assurance to government of the benefits accruing from its investment of public money in research and for benchmarking research performance nationally and internationally. For both of these purposes, assessing research at least at the level of granularity of REF2014 is essential. It is not clear that decreasing the number of units of assessment further would be either to the benefit of better assessment or a means to reduce burden.
13. Similarly, decoupling outputs from particular investigators would demand complex rules to ensure a spread of researchers were producing outputs for assessment; there was no appetite for this in our community.
14. The existing Environment template could be combined with the 'Impact' template. In addition to requiring information on the general research environment as in 2014, submissions to 2021 could explain how an institution will ensure that the follow-through from research to wider benefit is encouraged, supported and facilitated as part of its overall management of research. This narrative should be structured in order to guide universities in their submissions and ease the assessment process for reviewers. We recommend that the assessment weighting of a combined template should not exceed the sum of Environment and Impact weightings in REF2014. The Academy would not support deflating the weighting of research outputs in the overall assessment of submitted units.
15. Impact case studies should be retained alongside a new, combined template for 'Impact' and Environment. These case studies should remain in narrative form. As the KCL analysis<sup>4</sup> of REF2014 impact case studies demonstrated, there was a hugely

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ascb.org/dora/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Analysis,of,REF,impact/Analysis\\_of\\_REF\\_impact.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Analysis,of,REF,impact/Analysis_of_REF_impact.pdf)

diverse range of impacts, for which narrative case studies are really the only way to demonstrate the wider benefits of research.

**Question 3: What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?**

16. The British Academy is not an organisation which submits to the REF.

**Question 4: What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?**

17. REF could collect data in such a way as to allow a breakdown of research performance by ethnicity, gender and age so as to reveal those departments that foster an inclusive, equal and diverse research environment.

**Question 5: How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?**

18. The Academy is currently undertaking a project on interdisciplinary research<sup>5</sup> which will report before Summer 2016. This will make specific recommendations for assessing interdisciplinary research and we will share this with BIS in due course. A separate submission to this REF consultation will be made by Professor David Soskice FBA as chair of the British Academy Interdisciplinarity Working Group.

19. Often the most innovative, interesting and impactful work is happening at the margins of disciplines. The current BIS Global Challenges initiative is evidence of this. Evidence we have gathered through the Academy's Interdisciplinarity project suggests that the perception that interdisciplinarity is not treated well in the REF is widespread and that it is seen as a major disincentive to undertaking interdisciplinary work.

20. While HEFCE has evidence<sup>6</sup> that interdisciplinary research submitted to REF2014 scored equally as well as non-flagged research, some institutions were put off from submitting research that they thought of as interdisciplinary due to the perception that it is less well received in the REF process. This perception challenge should be addresses seriously by HEFCE in the future design of REF, as it represents the single strongest barrier to interdisciplinary outputs being submitted, and therefore recognised.

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Interdisciplinarity.cfm>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFreview/Interdisciplinarity/>

21. Moreover, evidence gathered through the Interdisciplinarity project suggests that in REF 2014, institutions flagged outputs as interdisciplinary only erratically, in such a way that demonstrates a lack of confidence in this system. It is essential that the mechanisms for flagging interdisciplinary research and cross-referring are clearly communicated, operate smoothly and are transparent so that there is greater consistency in how they are used.

**Question 6: In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and / or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g. success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming the system?**

22. The REF process can negatively influence the choices of individual researchers, by encouraging work on shorter-term projects that will correlate with the cyclical assessment exercises, and constraining publication practices in ways that are perceived to be most acceptable to REF assessors. As a result of the REF process, universities systematically and pragmatically encourage their researchers to publish early.
23. Measures in the REF should not contribute to an increase in pressures which are not healthy for the long-term career progression of academics. A simplified process whereby everyone on a research contract is submitted to an exercise that accepts all forms of outputs for peer review would minimise incentives to adopt strategies that limit career choices. Requiring all academics with research in their contract to be submitted would also obviate many of the pernicious games currently played with the REF.
24. In order to further minimise incentives to game the system, the introduction of a cut-off date could be considered, i.e. establishing a date after which any researcher's outputs could only be submitted by the HEI where they were employed up until that date. Subsequent outputs could be submitted through the new HEI. This might also enable a more accurate calibration of the relative quality of departments.
25. One of the unintended consequences of fixed-term research assessment exercises is the financial cost involved in Vice-Chancellors' decisions about whether to allow a researcher to leave for an alternative institution attempting to attract them for their submission to the REF or pay the increased salary that the researcher has been offered elsewhere. In essence, these dealings have meant that the price of academia to the tax payer has increased without any corresponding increase in quality.

**Question 7: In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?**

26. The Academy believes that REF distorts disciplines and the research process. The focus on discipline-based panels can impede development of new thinking. Universities tend to be risk-averse in relation to REF submissions and to encourage the production of 'safe' outputs – journal articles in particular – at the expense of unconventional media. This affects disciplines differently, particularly in relation to long-form, monograph outputs.
27. In many humanities disciplines, as well as some social science disciplines such as law, the monograph is the career-defining output. The Academy is concerned that the in-depth, innovative and disruptive research that is necessarily communicated through monographs is being discouraged by the REF process. For this reason, the double-weighting of monographs should be encouraged, but with essential regard for cross-panel consistency.

**Question 8: How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?**

28. QR is a crucial part of the funding system precisely because it affords institutions the flexibility to invest in bottom-up, curiosity driven research that can flourish into larger, more targeted programmes. There are serious risks in incentivising universities to direct QR towards plans to meet top-down challenges set by government. It would both subvert the principle of dual support and potentially introduce a new level of game-playing. REF should not undermine the autonomous strategic research planning of HEIs.

**Question 9: Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?**

29. In our consultation, we heard evidence that a simple way to reduce the burden of the REF process would be to introduce a single deadline for all elements of the submission. In the last REF there were 4 different deadlines: for impact (July 2013), for people to be in post (October 2013), for submission (November 2013), and for outputs to be published (December 2013). The rationale for this was not clear. Requiring submission prior to the deadline for outputs led in some cases to institutions choosing not to submit particular outputs where the risk of non-publication by the deadline was deemed too great. The end of a calendar year would be more straightforward.
30. The British Academy concludes its submission by referring back to its introduction above where we say:

- The Academy asserts that metrics alone are not capable of assessing research quality;
- That peer review remains the gold standard and must be retained;
- That a fundamental reconceptualization of impact is needed, both how it is defined and how it is assessed;
- There is an absolute need to obviate distortion of the research process and damage to research careers that RAE/REF exercises have induced.
- The Academy is concerned about the burden of REF, most particularly on universities and researchers, and we recommend a 100% staff submission with sampling post-submission to reduce this burden and avoid distortions.
- Sampling post-submission may also be used to reduce the burden of output assessment itself, although the community does recognise the necessity and importance of some 'burden' in order to maintain rigorous peer review of outputs.