



# REF 2021 draft panel criteria and working methods

A submission from the British Academy  
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For further information, contact:  
Adam Wright  
[a.wright@britac.ac.uk](mailto:a.wright@britac.ac.uk)  
+44 (0)207 969 5214

## **Summary**

Research England are consulting on the draft assessment criteria and working methods of the main and sub-panels for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021. The consultation document provides a comprehensive description of the information required in submissions to the REF, and how the REF panels will assess submissions.

Changes to the assessment framework and criteria have been informed by recommendations from Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework in 2016 and evidence submitted to the subsequent HEFCE consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework in 2017.

Many of the positions in this submission are derived from previous evidence submitted by the British Academy to both the Stern Review<sup>1</sup> and the HEFCE consultation.<sup>2</sup>

The Academy is also responding to a parallel consultation on the draft guidance to panels in REF 2021.

## **Introduction**

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences (HSS). As a Fellowship of over 1000 of the country's leading academics, the Academy exists to promote and champion its disciplines. The humanities and social sciences provide a critical lens through which society can address the wide-ranging challenges we face today.

Given that the British Academy is not a higher education institution, we are responding to this consultation in our role as a funder of research and researchers in the humanities and social sciences, and on behalf of our HSS community and Fellowship, the majority of whom will be directly involved with and impacted by the next Research Excellence Framework.

## **Part 2 Unit of Assessment descriptors**

### **Consultation question 1 (Part 2: UOA descriptors):**

*Do the UOA descriptors provide a clear and appropriate description of the disciplines covered by the UOAs? Please include any suggestions for refining the descriptors and state which UOA(s) you are commenting on.*

The Academy feels that the individual disciplines are best placed to comment on the clarity and accuracy of the disciplinary descriptors.

The Academy is pleased to see the creation of a separate Unit of Assessment for Archaeology. We previously requested to HEFCE that they address the difficulties that were experienced by Geography and Archaeology in REF 2014. Data from REF 2014 showed that

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20Full%20%20Response%20Lord%20Stern%27s%20Review%20of%20REF%200.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20response%20to%20the%20second%20REF%20consultation.pdf>

the volume of submissions for Archaeology was at a comparable level to that for Classics, for which there is a separate sub-panel, indicating that there is a case on grounds of scale for Archaeology to be treated in a similar way.

### **Part 3 Assessment criteria**

#### **Section 1 Submissions**

##### **Consultation question 2 (Part 3, Section 1: Submissions):**

a. Overall, the criteria are **appropriate** in Part 3, Section 1: Submissions:

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

b. Overall, the criteria are **clear** in Part 3, Section 1: Submissions:

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

c. Please comment on the criteria in Part 3, Section 1: Submissions, in particular on:

- where further clarification is required

- where refinements could be made

- whether there are areas where more consistency across panels could be achieved

- whether there are differences between the disciplines that justify further differentiation between the main panel criteria.

Where referring to particular main panels, please state which one(s).

#### **Pedagogic Research**

The Academy supports the approach to pedagogic research submissions set out in the draft guidance. Based on its findings and recommendations in the Joint Academies Education Research Project, the Academy supports the development of interdisciplinary research in education and understands the need to support and encourage growth of curriculum and pedagogy research outside of education departments. We believe that the proposed approach for REF 2021 is in line with the project's findings and recommendations.

#### **Section 2 Outputs**

##### **Consultation question 3 (Part 3, Section 2: Outputs):**

a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in Part 3, Section 2: Outputs:

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

b. Overall, the criteria are clear in Part 3, Section 2: Outputs:

- o Strongly agree*
- o Agree***
- o Neither agree nor disagree*
- o Disagree*
- o Strongly disagree*

*c. Please comment on the criteria in Part 3, Section 2: Outputs, in particular on:*

- the proposed criteria for double-weighting outputs in Main Panels C and D, and on whether requests to double-weight books should automatically be accepted*
- whether Annex C 'Main Panel D – outputs types and submission guidance' is helpful and clear*
- where further clarification is required*
- where refinements could be made*
- whether there are areas where more consistency across panels could be achieved*
- whether there are differences between the disciplines that justify further differentiation between the main panel criteria.*

*Where referring to particular main panels, please state which one(s).*

### **Interdisciplinarity**

The Academy strongly supports the enhanced procedures for assessing interdisciplinary research, including the appointment of an interdisciplinary research advisory panel and interdisciplinary research advisers. We hope that the measures will help dispel any perception that interdisciplinary research is less well received in the REF process, as our *Crossing Paths* research found that some institutions had been put off submitting interdisciplinary research to REF 2014 due to such negative perceptions.<sup>3</sup>

We also hope that the development of a clear definition of interdisciplinary research and greater clarity in the assessment process will encourage institutions to apply greater consistency in the flagging of interdisciplinary submissions. Evidence gathered through the *Crossing Paths* project suggested that in REF 2014, institutions flagged outputs as interdisciplinary erratically, in such a way that demonstrated a lack of confidence in the process.

### **Double Weighting**

In its response to the HEFCE consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework, the British Academy asked HEFCE to revisit its guidance on the double-weighting of outputs to ensure assessment methods reflected practice across the full disciplinary spectrum and accounted for the way different research approaches take varying periods of time to be fully realised.

The Academy is pleased with the level of nuance and flexibility in the approaches to double-weighting for Panels C and D.

However, the Academy seeks clarification on the process for submitting reserve outputs given the principle of decoupling. In REF 2014, where an individual submitted two or more double-weighting requests, it was possible to rank reserve outputs. It is not clear in the guidance whether different reserve outputs must be attributed to each double-weighting

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Crossing%20Paths%20-%20Full%20Report\\_2.pdf](https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Crossing%20Paths%20-%20Full%20Report_2.pdf)

request or if there is some flexibility to attribute the same output to different requests by using a ranked reserve list for each Unit of Assessment submitted to.

### **Citation data**

The Academy supports the proposal to limit the use of metrics to UoA 16 (Economics and Econometrics) in Panel C and to make Panel D exempt. Citation metrics are of limited value in many HSS fields, particularly those which make extensive use of monographs and book chapters rather than journal articles as publication types, since these types of output typically do not enter into bibliometric calculations, and, additionally, in those disciplines which publish more commonly in languages other than English, for which there is a lack of comparable data.

The Academy agrees that metrics, where they are of relevance, may inform the assessments of specialist panels but they cannot substitute for them. The Academy believes that individual panels should be able to decide whether quantitative data should inform their assessment of outputs. We also agree that such data should be managed and supplied only by the REF team and not by HEIs.

The Academy also welcomes the explicit exclusion of journal impact factors. We made it abundantly clear in our response to HEFCE's independent review of metrics for research assessment that under no circumstances should journal impact factors be used in any kind of research evaluation whether of individuals or of institutions.<sup>4</sup> This is one of the principal recommendations of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), to which HEFCE was a signatory, alongside the seven research councils, the British Academy and the Royal Society.<sup>5</sup>

### **Section 3 Impact**

#### **Consultation question 4 (Part 3, Section 3: Impact):**

*a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in Part 3, Section 3: Impact:*

*o Strongly agree*

***o Agree***

*o Neither agree nor disagree*

*o Disagree*

*o Strongly disagree*

*b. Overall, the criteria are clear in Part 3, Section 3: Impact:*

*o Strongly agree*

***o Agree***

*o Neither agree nor disagree*

*o Disagree*

*o Strongly disagree*

*c. Please comment on the criteria in Part 3, Section 3: Impact, in particular on:*

*- where further clarification is required*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/HEFCE%20Metrics%20call%20for%20evidence%20-%20British%20Academy.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sfdora.org/signers/>

- where refinements could be made
- whether there are areas where more consistency across panels could be achieved
- whether there are differences between the disciplines that justify further differentiation between the main panel criteria.

Where referring to particular main panels, please state which one(s).

The Academy welcomed HEFCE's previous recommendations for a broader and deeper definition of impact in the consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework. Impact as defined in REF 2014 was narrow and implied direct causation, failing to account for wider and more nuanced benefits that are seen in bodies of humanities and social science research.

The Academy supports the broader and more inclusive definition of impact in the panel guidance as well as the additional guidance for panels C and D. In particular, the guidance for Panel C on public scrutiny is essential for capturing the important role of research which is critical of existing institutions or policies.

We also support the inclusion of impact on teaching in higher education as part of this broader definition, as this is something we recommended in our response to the HEFCE consultation. We agree that the concepts of reach and significance are appropriate for the measurement of impact and approve of the more developed definitions of these in the guidance. Annex A is also fairly comprehensive in its examples of impact and we are pleased to see examples of impact through public engagement included. Research-led public engagement is a very important aspect of impact and has increasing relevance in the current wave of anti-intellectual populism.

#### Section 4 Environment

##### **Consultation question 5 (Part 3, Section 4: Environment):**

a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in Part 3, Section 5: Environment:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree**
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

b. Overall, the criteria are clear in Part 3, Section 4: Environment:

- Strongly agree
- Agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

c. Please comment on the criteria in Part 3, Section 4: Environment, in particular on:

- whether the difference in section weightings across main panels is sufficiently justified by disciplinary difference (paragraphs 322 and 323)
- whether the list of quantitative indicators provided at [www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk) is clear and helpful
- where further clarification is required
- where refinements could be made
- whether there are areas where more consistency across panels could be achieved

- whether there are differences between the disciplines that justify further differentiation between the main panel criteria.

Where referring to particular main panels, please state which one(s).

The Academy supports the inclusion of an institution's approach to supporting and enabling impact to be captured as a specific element of the institutional-level environment statement. This should ensure that the follow-through from research to wider benefit is encouraged, supported and facilitated as part of the overall management of research.

The Academy suggests that there are other factors relating to the experience of postgraduate research students beyond training and supervision which should be taken into account in the environment template. In particular, we suggest including in guidance for REF5b, Section 3 a reference to how infrastructure and facilities support postgraduate research students such as thorough dedicated office and study space, computer labs, and equipment as well as shared access to wider physical and digital research infrastructures.

#### **Part 4 Panel procedures**

##### **Consultation question 6 (Part 4: Panel procedures):**

a. Overall, the criteria are **appropriate** in Part 4: Panel procedures:

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

b. Overall, the criteria are **clear** in Part 4: Panel procedures:

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

c. Please comment on the criteria in Part 4: Panel procedures, in particular on: where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

None.

#### **Part 5 Panel working methods**

##### **Consultation question 7 (Part 5: Panel working methods):**

a. Overall, the criteria are **appropriate** in Part 5: Panel working methods:

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

b. Overall, the criteria are **clear** in Part 5: Panel working methods:

- o Strongly agree*
- o Agree***
- o Neither agree nor disagree*
- o Disagree*
- o Strongly disagree*

*c. Please comment on the criteria in Part 5: Panel working methods, in particular on: where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.*

The Academy stated in its response to the HEFCE consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework that it opposed the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year. The Academy believes that all sub-panel members should be contributing to the decisions made about how the panel is run. Early confirmation of panel membership also allows panel members to socialise their attitudes and understandings more broadly within the sector in advance of the assessment year, contributing to a more transparent culture of assessment. Nevertheless, we are pleased that efforts have been made to involve some panel members at the criteria-setting stage. This has no doubt contributed to the high quality of the sub-panel guidance.

**Consultation question 8: overall panel criteria and working methods**

*a. Overall, the 'Panel criteria and working methods' achieves an appropriate balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the panels.*

- o Strongly agree*
- o Agree***
- o Neither agree nor disagree*
- o Disagree*
- o Strongly disagree*

*b. Please comment on the balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the main panels.*

None.