

British Academy response to REF2028 issues for further consultation

6 October 2023

Background

In June 2023, the four UK higher education funding bodies made announcements of the initial decisions on the design of the next research excellence framework, REF2028. These decisions have been put forward with the intention of creating a broader and more holistic approach to research assessment. The announcements were accompanied by a consultation that focuses on specific policy aspects. This document comprises the response of the British Academy to that consultation. Fellows of the British Academy were consulted to directly inform the content of this response, alongside existing policy work on the topic of research assessment.

Volume measure & output submission

Questions 7, 8 & 9

The move towards a greater diversity of outputs being eligible for submission that is being proposed in the initial decisions is to be welcomed. This is likely to have positive effects for individual researchers and will open up submissions to a greater number of people and practices. We understand the rationale behind the changes being proposed to volume measure and output submission and support the general principles underpinning this.

Volume measure in REF2021

With respect to volume measure, it is worth pointing out that the Academy, and many within our disciplinary community, were supportive of changes that were made in this area for REF2021. Looking at the last exercise, most would agree that the volume measure rules worked quite effectively. With this in mind, there does not appear to be an imperative for reforming this area of the exercise. All reform creates a level of burden for those involved through adaptation and it is rare that changes of this scale do not have at least some form of unintended consequences, or teething problems in adoption, even with the best intentions. Nevertheless, we support the move towards the use of HESA data with respect to volume measure. The proposal to calculate volume using an average across AY 25/26 & 26/27 appears sensible.

Putting volume measure in the wider context of REF2028 initial decisions

One of the challenges in trying to evaluate the potential impact of these changes, within the wider context of the initial decisions for REF2028, is that much is yet to be decided, particularly in relation to new and expanded People, Culture and Environment section. We do not know the details of how this will be drawn up and implemented. And yet, in order for the overall reforms to meet their stated objectives, much will rest on the effectiveness of this revised part of the exercise. The consultation is written in such a way that the effect of this new environment section is taken as given. We are being asked to predict the effects on individual researchers without the all the relevant information on how the new system will work. Therefore, we will only be able to make a better judgement of this when we have more information at our disposal.

Removal of the minimum number of outputs

We are supportive of the removal of the minimum number of outputs for each researcher. We anticipate that this will have positive impacts on individual researchers, including those with protected characteristics or from underrepresented groups. This move should break down barriers that disincentivise institutions from recruiting those from outside of academia and will also support those who have had long interruptions to working life (evidence shows the latter will disproportionately be made up of those with protected characteristics).

Removal of the maximum number of outputs

We oppose the removal of the maximum number of outputs for individual researchers. On a practical level, this could increase the burden for institutions and those selecting outputs for submissions. This is because, where institutions would have previously considered up to five outputs from each researcher within their internal process of selection, they now might be considering a greater number of outputs from each individual for submission. For most of the disciplines that we represent, the effect is likely to be small here. Nevertheless, it seems an unnecessary thing to do. This will increase burden for REF managers and the like, but also for researchers themselves in reviewing, selecting and submitting their work internally.

The removal of the upper limit of outputs also risks creating a scenario in which more high profile and established researchers end up dominating submissions. One could argue that this is likely to be felt more acutely in smaller UoAs. There are concerns within the SHAPE disciplines that this could result in early career researchers being crowded out. This may have ramifications for who is recognized and rewarded within an institution, even if the REF itself is anonymous. These are risks not certainties. The removal of the maximum number of outputs could prove to have little effect on the overall distribution of outputs submitted within departments/institutions. It seems highly unlikely, however, that removing this upper limit will itself result in a more even distribution of outputs, and better representation of staff through the REF. Inequalities within the research labour market are well documented. The rationale for change here therefore does not seem convincing.

The risk of exacerbating unequal representation outweighs the potential benefits, which are not clear.

Weighting of outputs

The questions around volume measure link to a wider point about the weighting of outputs. The REF team should increase the weighting of longer-form outputs within the exercise. The weighting of books, which form a greater percentage of overall outputs for some SHAPE disciplines, are not proportionately weighted in respect of their size, and by extension, the level of work that underpins them. Enabling a more proportionate level of weighting for longer form outputs may go some way to aiding some of the issues relating to volume measure.

Full decoupling

The British Academy is supportive of the move away from the assessment of individuals within these proposals. We understand the rationale behind this shift towards institutions, since the funding ultimately follows the institution, and that this has the potential to place greater emphasis on fostering excellence through research culture. This is likely to be positive step for equitable partnerships and will create incentives for appropriate author rights to collaborators including early career researchers. We do, however, foresee some challenges with the inclusion and tracking of people who are 0.2 FTE for a minimum of 6 months. Furthermore, while a fully “decoupled” REF may help the sector move away from a culture of “publish or perish”, this new level of anonymity also brings with it risks in terms of the loss of recognition of those in the earlier stages of their careers through the exercise. Therefore, it is critical that the new enhanced People, Culture and Environment is robust and serves as a driver of positive research culture so any risks can be mitigated.

The weighting of different components of assessment

The Academy does not have a position on the relative weighting of the different components of the exercise, and the changes that have been made with respect to this in the initial decision for REF2028. This is because there is a diversity of views on this topic across our Fellowship and wider community. As stated above, the new focus on research culture in REF2028 is to be welcomed. It is worth pointing out, however, that there is some discontent within the SHAPE research community that, taking account of the weight given to the disciplinary contribution, outputs themselves will count for less than 50% of the overall quality profile. For some this represents a symbolic change in the exercise, whose primary purpose is to assess research excellence. This does not necessarily represent the views of a majority, but it is certainly worth noting.

It is important to emphasise that, even with a reduced percentage of the overall REF score, there are still very strong incentives for institutions to prioritise 3 and 4 star research in their submission, since outputs still count for more than the other components within the exercise. It is of course perfectly legitimate for institutions to identify those outputs that meet this threshold for excellence, regardless of the REF criteria. But one can imagine a scenario in which these considerations override the incentives developed within the new people, culture and environment section. Within the context of a “decoupled” REF, where there is no upper limit to outputs, this could translate into an early career researcher being overlooked within a submission.

As we have outlined above, the new people culture and environment part of the REF may go some way to mitigating against, or even preventing, some of the unintended consequences we have outlined. But we do not yet have all the details. The format used in REF2021, a self-reported open narrative statement, would not in-of-itself be sufficient to the task. There is potential here to incorporate some metrics as a counterbalance to submissions becoming lop-sided or dominated by certain researchers, by getting institutions to submit (anonymised) information on the number of researchers involved, the percentage of submitted staff who are at different levels within the

institution, the proportion of those who have protected characteristics and the percentage of research active staff included in the outputs.

Outputs sole-authored by postgraduate students

Question 10

While we understand the desire to broaden out who is included in the REF, we have significant reservations about making outputs sole-authored by postgraduate students eligible for submission. Many PhD theses or other outputs from students make a huge contribution to their discipline and should certainly be celebrated. But it is a category error to define a PhD thesis as something eligible for the REF, as they are not designed to be outputs in this regard. There is also a potential disconnect here between the intention to move away from a “publish or perish” culture for staff and a move to include postgraduate students, which could put greater pressure on them to be “REFable”. This would also favour elite institutions that have the infrastructure and scope to align their postgraduate programs to other fellowships and pathways. We think a clear boundary should be maintained between expectations for staff and students and therefore sole-authored outputs from postgraduates should be ineligible. This should not preclude recognition of the contribution that postgraduate research students make to their disciplines. But this might be better incentivized and encouraged through a strengthening of the new People, Culture and Environment section.

Co-authored outputs

Question 12

We endorse the arrangements for co-authored outputs that are put forward in the consultation. We appreciate the challenge in striking a balance between supporting collaboration and supporting the work of the unit. While there is some risk of inequitable outcomes, we feel it is overall a sensible approach. Perhaps the more pressing issue with respect to multi-authored impacts, is how these are effectively assessed, especially those outputs with large numbers of named co-authors. Concerns were raised in the main panel reports of REF2021 over the challenges these multi-authored outputs presented for assessors. It may prove to be a wasted opportunity if this period of consultation and review is not used to reflect upon this.

Impact Case Studies

Questions 14, 15 & 16

The move to broaden the impact component of the REF to a more holistic and inclusive “engagement and impact” is a positive step, particularly for the humanities. The British Academy welcomes the proposal to reduce the minimum number of submissions per unit of assessment within an institution. The previous requirement to submit two impact case studies was reported as a barrier for smaller units and some more specialist institutions within the SHAPE disciplines. We therefore think that the impact of reducing the minimum number to one will be positive and open up the process. The British Academy also welcomes the proposal to remove the requirement for underpinning research to be at least 2*. Revising the thresholds between case study requirements

stands to open up the process to a more diverse range of impact and forms of engagement and reduce bureaucracy. It is also likely to have positive equality, diversity and inclusion benefits in terms of whose research impact is being recognised.

The British Academy welcomes the proposal to weight the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies. The impact statement offers institutions the opportunity to talk more holistically about impact and describe institutional approaches to encouraging this. We would welcome the funding bodies conducting some form of modelling to see what these sliding scales might look like in practice before proceeding with this approach. It is also worth ensuring that institutions are not disincentivised to submit more case studies and prioritise their institutional level statement.

Covid

Question 18

We support the proposed measures to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic in REF2028. Researchers in some of the SHAPE disciplines, particularly those conducting anthropological and intensive language study fieldwork, will have been locked out of research on projects that normally run to long timelines. Moreover many libraries and archives were closed for long periods over the pandemic. These interruptions will be compounded by other factors that link to protected characteristics, and so the measures seem appropriate to mitigate for such individuals.