



# Green Paper: *Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*

A response from the British Academy

**January 2016**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, operating as a Fellowship of more than 1,000 of the world's most eminent scholars in the humanities and social sciences, elected for their outstanding research. The Academy funds research across the UK and in other parts of the world, in disciplines ranging from archaeology to economics, from psychology to history, and from literature to law – producing knowledge, insights and ideas that help us to address the great challenges of our time. The Academy seeks to increase public understanding of how all these subjects contribute to our economic, social, cultural and individual well-being.
2. The British Academy welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government's proposals in the Green Paper *Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. Our response provides general comments on the main themes and proposals in the Green Paper, and we look forward to working closely with Government on further details as proposals develop. The Academy will comment here on the proposed structural changes to the higher education and research system, the introduction of a teaching excellence framework, and on the research excellence framework.
3. Our key points are as follows:
  - Dual support is central to the continued success and strength of the UK's research base. Every possible step must be taken to ensure that this is maintained in any new structure, and we would recommend that dual support be written in to the constitution of Research UK.
  - By not conceiving of the HE and research system as a whole, Government risks developing a system of policy and regulation that does not reflect the ways in which universities operate.
  - The separation of research and teaching – both in terms of institutions of regulation, and policymaking – risks driving the two further apart, and would make the best quality of teaching, that which is research-led, less likely.
  - It is not clear where overall system-wide oversight, including of subject-level risks and research capacity, would sit in the new structure.
  - Any new system for measuring the quality of teaching must learn lessons from assessing quality in research, and be wary of creating too much burden, or setting in motion incentives that are undesirable.
  - The use of metrics to assess teaching quality should be done with caution, particularly in the case of student opinion.
4. The Green Paper defers to the Nurse Review in commenting on the future landscape of research funding, and will also need to take into account any recommendations made by the recently-announced independent review of research assessment being led by Lord Stern. It is essential that the consequences of these separate reviews are considered by Government as a whole. The framing of teaching and employability (in the Green Paper) separately from structural changes to the research councils (in the Nurse Review), and research assessment (in the forthcoming Stern Review), could result in a new system that is disjointed. It is vital that the Government ensures

that it conceives of the higher education and research system *as a whole*, including how universities themselves operate and the various integrated functions they serve (such as in the development of new ideas through research or highly skilled graduates through teaching) so that all can be carried out most effectively. By not conceiving of the HE and research system as a whole, Government risks undermining what is already successful in the UK sector.

#### STRUCTURES (Questions 18-23)

5. The Academy welcomes the continuing commitment to dual support, which has produced not only an internationally competitive research base, but one that is impressively efficient.<sup>1</sup> The outstanding international reputation of UK research reflects the success of the dual support system. It is essential that we retain and build on the mechanisms that have enabled the UK to be highly effective at exploiting its investment in research.
6. Quality related (QR) funding is vital. The complementarity of both legs of the dual support system is a crucial strength of the UK system. It allows for both challenge-led and curiosity-driven research; enables universities to support early career researchers while they are developing their capabilities to secure RCUK funding; and is critical to maintaining a diverse, UK-wide research base, to the benefit of students and the economy.
7. The costs and benefits of co-locating the administration of both legs of dual support needs further consideration, alongside potential unforeseen consequences. If dual support is to be located within the same organisation that also handles oversight of the Research Councils, it is essential that the distinct function of each form of funding is maintained, and that the expertise developed in HEFCE is not lost. The increased strategic oversight that may come from a closer relationship between research councils, and a single Chief Executive, would be of benefit to the UK research base, particularly for the support of interdisciplinary research. However, Government needs to take every possible step in the establishment of Research UK to ensure that QR funding retains its essential characteristics: excellence funded wherever it is found, for curiosity-driven, bottom-up research, allowing universities flexibility to make their own decisions about fostering and developing the research environment. We would therefore recommend that the dual-support funding model be embedded in the constitution of Research UK.
8. Teaching and research could be better integrated in parts of the sector as a way of enhancing both quality and the student experience. We are concerned that this integration will be undermined by a new regulatory architecture that universities may be incentivised to mirror in their own internal structures. Taken in combination, the proposals outlined in the Green Paper and the Nurse Review would separate the teaching and research functions of universities at the level of regulation and policy-making, the former undertaken by the Office for Students, and the latter by either a larger Research UK body that incorporates both legs of dual support, or RUK alongside separate organisation, possibly the Department itself. This would create, for the first time, a regulatory and policy-making function that does not reflect the integrated ways in which universities operate. The Government should thoroughly

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/performance-of-the-uk-research-base-international-comparison-2013>

examine the existing connections between research and teaching in universities, and assess whether separating the regulatory architecture could impact on or limit universities' inclination to further integrate teaching and research, something which is a key driver of quality in both.

9. Reflecting on the new structures outlined in proposed by the Green Paper and Nurse Review combined, the Academy is concerned by the apparent lack of one body responsible for overall oversight of the higher education and research landscape. The choices of students at undergraduate level will continue to impact on the behaviour of universities, particularly on whether or not certain courses will be offered year on year. It is possible that some subjects will be placed under greater pressure, across disciplines, as student numbers drop, or as they are deemed too expensive to teach with the same fee level. The threat here is not only to the financial sustainability of universities and the viability of courses, but to the long-term supply of UK expertise, expertise that plays a central role in driving productivity and tackling our most pressing global challenges.<sup>2</sup> Vulnerability in a subject may exist across both teaching and research, and coordination of the two will be more challenging if they are separated in the proposed new structure. It would have impact on the subjects themselves, right through the system to postgraduate, PhD level, and into the research system and supply of researchers.
10. In the new architecture proposed, it remains unclear as to which body would have oversight of this kind of issue. Government must give serious consideration to how this system-wide risk is monitored. If this function is not yet assigned to any of the new institutions proposed by these changes, the Government should involve the National Academies in discussing potential solutions, to ensure that this particular kind of systemic risk to subjects is monitored and acted upon. There may be an enhanced role for the national academies, in partnership with learned societies, in providing subject-level oversight of the sector, right through from teaching to research.

#### TEACHING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK (Questions 2-11)

11. The Academy is committed to working alongside colleagues inside and outside of universities to ensure that all students in the UK receive the highest quality teaching in the humanities and social sciences (HSS), and that the higher education system is structured and resourced in order to achieve this. The skills engendered by rigorous teaching and learning in HSS disciplines are essential to the current and future health of the UK economy. HSS graduates are in high demand by leading employers internationally.<sup>3</sup>
12. The Green Paper correctly identifies that the higher level skills developed by UK graduates are essential to economic growth, and to personal reward. Ideas, innovation and knowledge are the key drivers of modern economies. According to the OECD '[their role] as compared with natural resources, physical capital and low skill labour, has taken on greater importance. Although the pace may differ, all OECD economies are moving towards a knowledge-based economy.' The UK is

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<sup>2</sup> British Academy, 2015, response to House of Commons Business Innovation and Skills Committee inquiry on Productivity, available online:

<sup>3</sup> Vitae, 2010, *What do researchers do?*

primarily a service economy and some of the highest rates of productivity growth lie in this sector. It represents 78% of the economy, and while GDP has grown at an average compound annual rate of 2.0% since 1997, the service sector has grown at an average compound annual rate of 2.8%, orienting the UK's economy more strongly towards these industries.<sup>4</sup> A growing services sector needs a growing supply of HSS-skilled graduates.

13. A well-designed system of assessing and rewarding teaching quality will inspire positive change in university teaching, to encourage the development of innovative and effective pedagogies, and to create an optimal learning environment for students.
14. The best teaching generally follows the best research. Assuming a false dichotomy that pits research against teaching is unhelpful. What distinguishes Higher Education from schools is that teaching in universities is research-informed, and in the best departments, research-led. Moreover, often the most innovative curriculum designs at universities come from those who are at the forefront of research in their disciplines. This is perhaps most keenly felt in postgraduate provision where teaching must necessarily be informed by cutting edge research.
15. Despite this, current incentives for career progression in research do not encourage teaching excellence alongside research excellence. It would be worth considering how to connect any TEF with the incentive structures in the REF, and to break down any mismatch that might work against research-led teaching being at the heart of the university system. A teaching excellence framework might also encourage a reorganisation in the priorities of a university to give more emphasis on teaching, and more status to those who choose to teach, alongside research. This might encourage more promotion schemes for teaching excellence and more funding being devoted internally to this area. Unfortunately, this would be challenging if the TEF and REF were to be carried out by different institutions dividing teaching and research. Excellent teaching is vital, and the rewarding of excellent teaching is to be encouraged, but reward structures for teaching and research need to be coordinated.
16. The Academy is concerned that the design of a system needs to be aware of the potential for universities to game, particularly if it is linked to the ability to raise fees. The primary goal of a TEF should be to raise quality across the board and encourage innovative and effective practice. Any form of assessment inevitably incentivises a degree of strategising about how best to compete. This is a criticism frequently levelled at the current REF, with Fellows of the Academy expressing concern that research assessment exercises have encouraged behaviours which distort the way in which academics forge their careers and the nature of the research that they undertake.
17. The Government should be aware that linking teaching quality to a system of funding will result in much game-playing by institutions, as is already evident with the REF. The risk is that effort will be placed not on actually improving quality, but on the goal of securing greater fees by adapting to the system and scoring highly according to particular metrics. It may be worth returning to the positioning of

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<sup>4</sup> ONS (2015), all accessible at <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ios/index-of-services/april-2015/index.html>

teaching within REF – in REF 2014 departments were not able to enter teaching as part of research impact. It is a view of many Academy Fellows that teaching is a key way in which their research has wider impact and benefit – both through the benefits that students gain directly and the ideas that are passed on through those students’ professional lives.

18. The main challenges of a teaching excellence assessment system are establishing a robust and shared definition of quality, its measurement, and the evidence for poor quality in the first place. The Academy would stress the need to analyse with rigor the evidence that teaching, across disciplines, is indeed ‘currently the poor cousin to research’.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the metrics that are and will be used to measure teaching quality have not yet been detailed by Government. Is what constitutes teaching ‘quality’ uniform across disciplines? Any system would need flexibility and a degree of discipline specificity, and it is helpful that the Green Paper makes this clear. The Government should work closely with National Academies across disciplines to access evidence on what this means in practice.
19. Linking teaching quality too closely to contact time will not be a reliable measure of quality in all disciplines and it is better to focus instead on learning outcomes and experience. There is a great diversity of teaching approaches in higher education involving more or less contact time, and innovation in university teaching based on e-learning technologies, such as ‘flipped classrooms’ and blended learning, mean that contact time is no longer a clear concept. For example, contact time may not be the route to independent thinking and learning, which is a desirable outcome of some of the best university teaching. Universities are concerned with the advancement of knowledge and understanding, and encouraging innovation and creativity – not about narrowly defined ‘teaching’. Ensuring that any TEF is able to capture this diversity, innovation, and purpose will be important.
20. Students should be involved in the design of the TEF if it is to be used to enable greater market transparency and informed student choices. Students, however, are not a homogenous group, and some may value different aspects of their degree experience – be that face-to-face contact hours, strong employability-focus, proximity to the best researchers, library facilities, etc. This may also vary between disciplines. A degree of flexibility in any metrics used to assess teaching quality must be present.
21. The Academy is concerned that the framing of students within the Green Paper is generally too homogenous. The Green Paper often implies that a student is viewed as an undergraduate, and between the ages of 18 and 21. There is very little attention paid in the document to mature students, or those wishing to work part time. The Government should engage more with these groups, and their representative bodies, to ensure that there are no unintended consequences to the focus on UG full-time students.
22. Metrics developed to assess quality must not be wholly concerned with student opinion, and must be used very carefully. British Academy/Royal Society Fellow Professor Dorothy Bishop has provided a helpful analysis of the dangers of relying

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/474266/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice-accessible.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474266/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice-accessible.pdf) p8

on the National Student Survey too heavily.<sup>6</sup> Although initial rounds of this mechanism to assess quality will likely include use of existing measures, we must also develop metrics that get to objective representation of student success from teaching, and value-added measures of input versus output rising over time. The Academy would suggest that any interpretation either of existing metrics or of newly-designed and measured metrics should be carried out by expert panels, who can interpret them in context.

23. The Academy is concerned that a truly robust TEF, with the trust of the academic and teaching community, could soon grow to the scale and cost of the equivalent REF, without commensurate benefit to educational provision. It would be useful to ask Government how the cost of the exercise will be measured, and at what level the cost will be deemed too great for the potential benefit.
24. A major benefit of the previous quality assurance system has been the sharing of best practice. The Academy is concerned that this might be lost by a process that is over-reliant on the collection and interpretation of data and outcomes. If the TEF were to become an exercise in the interpretation of metrics, undertaken by academic 'panels', much in the manner of the REF, then this data-heavy exercise could be about providing evidence to inform market requirements rather than quality assurance processes. So, for example, it is unclear how it will enable the sharing of good practice, particularly if the two exercises were handled by different organisations.

#### TEACHING RESEARCH METHODS

25. The Academy is particularly concerned that any system that seeks to address teaching should place at its heart the quality of the teaching of research methods, with a particular focus on quantitative skills. The kind of economy the UK is becoming – increasingly a 'knowledge economy' – will require a workforce with training in a broad range of robust research methodologies. The research methods of academic disciplines are being employed more widely than ever in the broader labour market and economy, including, for example, the use of ethnography in Government to better understand citizens' engagement with public services. It is essential that universities are challenged and rewarded for focusing on research methods teaching for all undergraduate students.
26. This is particularly the case for the analysis of data. The UK must strengthen its research capacity in data analysis, which is revolutionising both how we see the world and how we interact with it. About seven in ten employees say that quantitative skills are essential or important in carrying out their work. While roughly three in 10 jobs require basic arithmetic skills, a further four in ten require the ability to apply quantitative skills to a more advanced level. There is evidence that demand for more advanced skills, which might range from the ability to use descriptive statistics to highly complex mathematical procedures, has risen sharply in the past two decades, with the proportion of employees saying advanced mathematics or statistics are important in their jobs rising from 29% in 1997 to 38% in

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/nss-and-teaching-excellence-wrong-measure-wrongly-analysed>

2012.<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, the number of people reporting that arithmetical skills are not at all important in their jobs has declined.

#### THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK (Questions 24-28)

27. With the prospect of a restructured research funding landscape, 2016 represents a significant moment in which to design a research assessment system that secures the confidence of the research community, achieves the aims of Government and, through funding the best research across disciplines, brings benefit to society and the economy. The Academy looks forward to responding to the independent review of REF to be undertaken by Lord Stern, and will make detailed comments on the design of research assessment at the appropriate point later in the year.
28. Academy Fellows are most concerned by three aspects of REF 2014, and the way in which it operated: 1) the need to reduce the burden of the exercise; 2) the need to ensure that the behaviours the exercise encourages are beneficial; and 3) the importance of developing a mechanism for recognising the wider benefits of research that has the confidence of both the research community and Government.
29. The Academy has noted that REF 2014 was perceived as burdensome by those submitting to the exercise – the institutions, administrators and the academics – and there is pressure to find ways of undertaking the assessment more cost-effectively. Reducing the burden of assessment should not be achieved at the expense of damaging what is good about the way the assessment currently operates, in particular the gold standard of peer review. The British Academy commends the findings of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Management published in July 2015.
30. Any form of assessment inevitably incentivises a degree of strategising about how best to compete. Rounds of research assessment have encouraged certain behaviours which are beginning to distort the way in which academics forge their careers and the nature of the research that they undertake. Research assessment should not discourage innovation and disincentivise long-term research projects.
31. It is widely accepted that there is a need to clearly demonstrate the wider benefit of research, beyond academia. Research is hugely beneficial to wider society and this should be explicitly recognised, rewarded and celebrated. The manner in which the wider benefit of research is measured should reflect the wide variety of research activity that takes place and the diverse range of contributions this makes outside of academia. Informed debate about ideas and values is an important contribution that research in the humanities and social sciences makes to wider society but is more challenging to measure than, for example, a direct contribution to policy formulation or economic growth. Future research assessment systems need to be able to appreciate and account for such soft influence over social attitudes and ideas which, in the long term, might be the most important type of impact that research can achieve.

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<sup>7</sup> British Academy (2015) Count us in: quantitative skills for a new generation: [http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/count\\_us\\_in\\_report.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/count_us_in_report.cfm)