



Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework (REF)

A submission from the British Academy

March 2017

For further information, contact:
Jonathan Matthews

j.matthews@britac.ac.uk

+44 (0)207 969 5214

OVERALL APPROACH

Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposal to maintain an overall continuity of approach with REF 2014, as outlined in paragraphs 10 and 23?

1. The Academy is pleased to respond to this consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework (REF). The Academy welcomed the direction of travel in Lord Stern's Independent Review, 'Building on Success and Learning from Experience', particularly around the definition of Impact, and its efforts to reduce the distortion of research careers as a result of the REF and the burden of the exercise. The Academy is encouraged that the principles of the Stern Review are to be operationalised, building on the existing measures in REF2014.
2. The Academy believes that the recommendations made in this consultation should be viewed holistically. In particular, recommendations concerning staff should be viewed in conjunction with recommendations for outputs, as these elements of the assessment system are interdependent and the appropriateness of recommendations for one depend on the recommendations for the other.
3. This consultation is being undertaken mid-way through a REF cycle. Institutions will already be planning research strategies without full knowledge of the assessment process. The Academy would welcome the opportunity to engage further with HEFCE as it analyses responses to the consultation and in particular about whether it might be better to test some of the more radical proposals such as non-portability of outputs first with a view to implementing this in the REF after next (see the answers to questions 10b and 38 below).
4. The Academy's response to this consultation takes the principles which it highlighted in response to the Stern Review call for evidence as a starting point. The Academy engaged with its Fellowship, award holders and the wider community of humanities and social science (HSS) researchers in order to generate its response to that call for evidence. Our full response is available [here](#).
5. In responding to this consultation, the Academy is also drawing on views heard through the following engagement activities:
 - a. An invitation to all Fellows to send in their views on the REF consultation;
 - b. The HSS learned societies network, convened in January 2017 on the REF consultation with helpful input from HEFCE;
 - c. A roundtable of Fellows in February 2017;
 - d. A survey of recent cohorts of early career award holders (post-doctoral fellows and British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award Holders).
6. The Academy has engaged closely with its sister national academies in generating its response to this consultation and convened a joint meeting with HEFCE in February 2017.
7. The Academy has responded to those questions in the consultation where it has a locus to speak on behalf of HSS disciplines. We have not answered questions for example, which address experiences of institutions which submit to the REF.

UNIT OF ASSESSMENT STRUCTURE

Question 2: What comments do you have about the Unit of Assessment structure in REF 2021?

8. The Academy has not heard evidence that the Unit of Assessment structure from REF2014 should be changed significantly for the second REF. Nevertheless, the Academy is aware that certain UOAs within its disciplinary remit, in particular Geography and Archaeology, experienced difficulties in REF2014. The Academy requests that HEFCE consider how these difficulties might be smoothed out for REF2021, through measures that ensure a collegiate approach to panel formation and ways for the panel to operate which reflect the needs of both disciplines and take into account the risks which arise from their relative size, if it is not possible for separate panels to be created (see answer to question 3b). Data from REF2014 demonstrate that 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.

EXPERT PANELS

Question 3b: Do you support the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year?

9. The Academy does not support the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year. The Academy believes that the early appointment of panel members encourages a more collegiate approach, with all panel members 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.

STAFF

Question 7: Do you have any comments on the proposal to use HESA cost centres to map research-active staff to UOAs and are there any alternative approaches that should be considered?

10. The Academy does not believe that HESA cost centres could be used to accurately map research-active staff onto UOAs. For research undertaken in many disciplines in HSS, HESA cost centres would not accurately map onto UOAs. Researchers employed in one cost centre do not necessarily undertake research relating to that cost centre. Cost centres are developed for teaching purposes and do not reflect the research process.
11. Submitting institutions should be able to determine the UOA that research is submitted to so that institutions can select the right fit for the research. Though this imposes some burden on the submitting institution, it is a small burden relative to the decision about who to submit in REF2014 and would facilitate a much more accurate assessment.

Question 8: What comments do you have on the proposed definition of ‘research-active’ staff?

12. The Academy believes that research contracts across HSS are relatively uniform and therefore determining research active staff through HESA Staff Selection codes should not be too problematic. The definition of ‘independence’ may affect some, especially in the social sciences, employed as research assistants and HEFCE should ensure that this definition is clear and robust across disciplines.

Question 9: With regard to the issues raised in relation to decoupling staff and outputs, what comments do you have on:

- a. **The proposal to require an average of two outputs per full-time equivalent staff returned?**
- b. **The maximum number of outputs for each staff member?**
- c. **Setting a minimum requirement of one for each staff member?**

13. In its [response](#) to the call for evidence to the Stern Review, the Academy recommended that “all staff employed in a submitting institution with research in their contract of employment should be submitted to the REF.” It argued that decision-making around which staff to submit to the REF incurred substantial opportunity costs and that this accounted for much of the burden of the exercise. The processes of staff selection within institutions were often divisive with the potential to damage research careers.
14. Through the consultation that the Academy undertook in advance of the Stern Review call for evidence, the Academy found no support for decoupling staff and outputs. Rather, the Academy recommended that “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...based in the first instance on a stratified random sample to ensure proportionate numbers of different types of output re assessed”. The Academy suggests that HEFCE revisit sampling as approach which could resolve the issues raised by the decoupling of staff and outputs, as discussed in the following paragraphs.
15. The Academy recognises that the principle of decoupling brings the welcome benefit of removing the need for intrusive investigations into the personal circumstances of individuals. From the Academy’s survey of its early career award holders (ECRs), responses suggest that many ECRs see advantages to decoupling staff and outputs as it could help ECRs focus on producing fewer but high quality outputs by minimizing pressure to produce multiple outputs. Some also commented that it could lead to fewer staff being placed on teaching-only contracts. But the Academy has also heard widespread concern about potential divisiveness caused by institutions entering the maximum number of outputs from “research stars” while outputs from others are marginalised. Some ECRs also feared that departments would not be interested in hiring them permanently.
16. The Academy therefore recommends that HEFCE undertake serious modelling of potential scenarios before adopting this new approach. If it is to be adopted, and given the recommendation that outputs are non-portable, the Academy recommends

that decoupling should only be introduced if zero is permitted as the bottom of the range of outputs per FTE returned to ensure that the need to account for personal circumstances of individuals is removed. The range of outputs should not exceed a maximum of five or six.

17. In considering the appropriate range of number of outputs the Academy also recommends that HEFCE revisits its guidance on the double-weighting of outputs to ensure that this reflects practice across the full disciplinary spectrum and takes into account the way different research approaches take varying periods of time to be fully realised.

Question 10: What are your comments on the issues described in relation to portability of outputs, specifically:

a. Is acceptance for publication a suitable marker to identify outputs that an institution can submit and how would this apply across different output types?

18. The appropriate identifier for outputs that an institution can submit will be particularly difficult to determine in HSS, given, for example, the nature of outputs such as monographs and non-text outputs, which are produced over long time frames by researchers who have often worked in various institutions. In many humanities disciplines, as well as some social science disciplines such as law, the monograph is the career-defining output and 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.
19. With monographs there are issues around which date in the publication process would ascribe 'ownership' to an institution: the date of submission? The date when a final version went to print and binding? The date of publication? These processes can be separated by at least a year, often much more.

c. Would non-portability have a negative impact on certain groups and how might this be mitigated?

20. The Academy understands the logic for introducing non-portability to tackle game playing, particularly through researcher transfers that took place ahead of REF2014. We heard evidence on how this can unfairly distort remuneration relativities in institutions. However, we consider portability of outputs encourages dynamism in the sector and can be crucial for career progression. Therefore, the Academy recommends that non-portability of outputs should be introduced only if exceptions for certain groups are put in place (as below).
21. The Academy believes that non-portability might negatively impact on ECRs. From its survey of ECRs, many expressed concern about non-portability. Portability was felt to be a key factor in hiring decisions around ECRs. A move towards weakening the 'ownership' of work was flagged as a concern and some felt 'disempowered' by the prospect of non-portable outputs. Others suggested that ECRs may not publish their work until they are secure in post. In order to mitigate this, HEFCE should consider that non-portability does not apply to those within, say, ten years of completing their PhD.

22. The Academy also believes that non-portability might negatively impact on those who have been forced to move institutions because their submitting unit has closed, as has been seen in for example some language departments. In order to mitigate this, an exception should also be made for researchers who are forced to move institutions because of a department closing.
23. The Academy would like to note that non-portability of outputs for senior staff also has associated risks. The incentives for a university to establish new areas and disciplines could be reduced if senior staffs' research cannot be assessed because it is non-portable. In emergent sub-disciplines, mobility is often very important in ways that the non-portability rule might disadvantage.
24. The Academy would also like to highlight that UK academia operates in an international environment, with an international and highly mobile labour market. There should not be disincentives to international mobility imposed by measures within the REF.
25. Given the risks identified above, the Academy recommends that the effects of non-portability are thoroughly investigated to ensure it would really bring benefits, with a view to introduction in the third REF, rather than REF2021.

OUTPUTS

Question 17: What are your comments on the assessment of interdisciplinary research in REF 2021?

26. The Academy believes that often the most innovative, interesting and impactful work is happening at the margins of disciplines. Evidence gathered through the Academy's report on interdisciplinary research, [Crossing Paths](#), showed that the perception that interdisciplinarity was not treated well in the REF 2014 was widespread and that the REF as currently structured is perceived as a major disincentive to submitting interdisciplinary work.
27. Measures proposed in this consultation could go some way to encouraging institutions to submit interdisciplinary work by providing assurances that it will be assessed as fairly as possible. For example, Interdisciplinary champions could send a positive signal that interdisciplinarity is being actively encouraged. The Academy hopes that the Interdisciplinary Advisory Panel that HEFCE have established will be able to advise further on the practicalities of these measures and take on board evidence from pilots that HEFCE may run. The Academy recommends that the Panel considers, for example, how multi or interdisciplinary outputs which are produced within a single institution can be assessed in a way which is comparable to arrangements which already exist for such outputs which involve multiple institutions.

Question 18: Do you agree with the proposal for using quantitative data to inform the assessment of outputs, where considered appropriate for the discipline? If you agree, have you any suggestions for data that could be provided to the panels at output and aggregate level?

28. The Academy believes that individual panels should be able to decide whether quantitative data should inform their assessment of outputs. In HSS, quantitative indicators are often less robust. In particular, book citation data are poor. The Academy is encouraged that HEFCE are working with the Forum for Responsible Metrics in developing a discipline-sensitive approach to drawing on quantitative data.

IMPACT

Question 19: Do you agree with the proposal to maintain consistency where possible with the REF 2014 impact assessment process?

29. The Academy believes that many of the difficulties involved in REF2014 were due to the fact that it was the first time this assessment had been included in REF and it therefore took time for universities to adjust. Impact in particular was completely new.
30. There are, however, considerable problems with the Impact assessment process as it was conceived in REF2014 and the attempts through this consultation to broaden and deepen the definition of impact, align it where possible with other measures and allow it to be based on a body of work are welcome and should be put in place for REF2021.

Question 20: What comments do you have on the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of impact?

31. The Academy welcomes the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of 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 diffuse, and not conducive to demonstrating that an outcome happened 'because of' a particular piece of research. The Academy supports an approach to Impact based on a body of research, knowledge and expertise. Including impact on teaching in higher education within the broader Impact measure would also be welcome.

Question 21: Do you agree with the proposal for the funding bodies and Research Councils UK to align their definitions of academic and wider impact? If yes, what comments do you have on the proposed definitions?

32. The Academy agrees that the definitions of academic and wider impact should be aligned across the Research Councils UK and the funding bodies for consistency and ease.

Question 22: What comments do you have on the criteria of reach and significance?

33. The concepts of reach and significance are appropriate for the measurement of Impact. More guidance, using the results and analysis of impact case studies from REF2014 should be encouraged for REF2021.

Question 23: What do you think about having further guidance for public engagement impacts and what do you think would be helpful?

34. Research-led public engagement is an important aspect of impact. HEFCE could consider looking at the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement's recent work in this area, as well as the approach taken in the cultural sector, in order to shape its guidance around measuring this kind of impact.

Question 25: Do you agree that the approach to supporting and enabling impact should be captured as an explicit section of the environment element of the assessment?

35. The Academy believes that an HEI's approach to supporting and enabling impact should be captured as an explicit section of the environment element of the assessment. 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.
36. The Academy believes that the relative weighting of the output, impact and environment sections of the exercise should remain the same as in REF2014, recognising that the primary focus should be on outputs.

Question 29: What comments do you have on the inclusion of examples of impact arising from research activity and bodies of work as well as from specific research outputs?

37. The Academy welcomes the recommendation to allow inclusion of examples of impact arising from research activity and bodies of work as well as from specific outputs due to the nature of the wider benefit of research in HSS.
38. However, there is concern that the Impact agenda has primarily involved researchers with an existing high profile to claim impact, potentially disincentivising younger researchers from pursuing work with impact. HEFCE might consider ways of ensuring impact is pursued throughout a research career.

ENVIRONMENT

Question 36: Do you agree with the proposals for awarding additional credit to units for open access?

39. The British Academy is represented on the Open Access Implementation Group by Professor Nigel Vincent FBA and will feed in more detailed views on Open Access policy in this way.

Question 38: What are your views on the introduction of institutional-level assessment of impact and environment?

40. The Academy believes that the introduction of institutional-level assessment of impact and environment should focus on multi and interdisciplinary support

provided by institutions and enable institutions to showcase work which might not be appropriate for individual UOAs, and could work well if examples are drawn on from across a sufficiently diverse spread of disciplines.

41. However, as the institutional-level assessment will be new, untested and potentially burdensome on institutions, HEFCE should only consider introducing it in the third REF after a pilot exercise has been run and reviewed. HEFCE should also ensure due consideration is given to the challenges it may pose for mono-technic institutions, not only in the humanities and social sciences.

Question 41: Given the proposal that the weighting for outputs remain at 65 per cent, do you agree that the overall weighting for impact should remain at 20 per cent?

42. The Academy does not believe that the weighting for Impact should be increased. REF should continue to focus primarily on assessing outputs and the weighting should reflect this. 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.

Question 43: What comments do you have on the proposed timetable for REF 2021?

43. The Academy recognises that much that is new in this consultation is suggested from the best of motives – to reduce burden and to obviate some game-playing. This consultation is being undertaken mid-way through a REF cycle. Institutions will already be planning research strategies without full knowledge of the assessment process. The Academy believes that some of the new components – the non-portability of outputs, for example – could introduce new, unintended and potentially perverse consequences and thus recommends that these should be properly modelled, piloted and reviewed with a view to including them in the REF after next, if their benefits are shown to outweigh disbenefits. The Academy would welcome the opportunity to engage further with HEFCE as it analyses responses to the consultation and designs any resulting pilot activity.