

Research Excellence Framework

Response to the second consultation on the assessment and funding of research
(HEFCE 2009/38)

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The following is the 1994 Group's response to the second HEFCE consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (REF). For more detailed information please refer to the individual responses of our members.

Members of the 1994 Group are: University of Bath, Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, Institute of Education University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex and University of York.

Consultation question 1

Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF? If not, explain why.

The 1994 Group welcomes this consultation. We strongly agree with the continued emphasis on research excellence and the proposal that impact must be rooted in excellent research in order to be rated highly. We note, however, that the definition of 'research' has changed (and it now has 'impact' buried within it).

We welcome the fact that HEFCE have reconsidered some aspects of the REF further to previous consultations, and that the exercise will build on the strengths of RAE 2008 by maintaining the strong element of peer review in judging overall research excellence.

It is important that there is greater transparency from an early stage as to how the REF results will translate into distribution of QR funding. It is essential that we understand as far as possible the consequences – in terms of the impact on the QR funding algorithm – of answering questions such as those posed in this consultation.

Consultation question 2

What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing outputs? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

Comments are especially welcomed on the following proposals:

- that institutions should select research staff and outputs to be assessed
- for the categories of staff eligible for selection, and how they are defined
- for encouraging institutions to submit – and for assessing – all types of high-quality research outputs including applied and translational research
- for the use of citation information to inform the review of outputs in appropriate UOAs (including the range of appropriate UOAs, the type of citation information that should be provided to panels as outlined in Annex C, and the flexibility panels should have in using the information)

and on the following options:

- whether there should be a maximum of three or four outputs submitted per researcher
- whether certain types of output should be ‘double-weighted’ and if so, how these could be defined.

Selection of Staff

We agree that institutions should be responsible for selection of both staff to be submitted and the outputs that are considered as they are best placed to make informed judgements.

Greater clarification is needed on the eligibility requirements of staff, particularly for those on fractional contracts. There also needs to be a clarification on whether staff who leave an institution before the census date will be included. We largely agree with the proposal to remove the previous C and D staff categories, barring a small number of tightly defined exceptions (e.g. NHS staff, Research Council units embedded in HEIs).

The majority of our members are concerned that the proportion of staff submitted will not be a significant factor in assessing output quality. We welcome the proposal for HESA to collect data about all eligible staff (submitted and not submitted) for the purposes of equal opportunities monitoring. It is absolutely essential that there is no room for questioning with regards to the staff definitions, in order to avoid the confusion that was experienced in relation to RAE 2008. We support the proposal that panels take account of critical mass, where appropriate, in their assessment of the research environment, subject to an agreed definition of “critical mass” being provided.

Citation Data

The group supports the proposal to use citation information to inform (and not replace) peer review. It will be important for panels to give clear guidance in their criteria statements about whether they will use such data and how. Institutions must have access to the same database being used by the HEFCE REF team to produce the citation data, in order to inform their staff selections and to verify data.

Number of outputs per researcher.

We are concerned that reducing the number of outputs to three could reduce the overall ‘discriminatory power’ of the assessment and make it easier to attain the highest possible outcomes. It is also not evident that reducing the number of outputs will significantly reduce burden (for example, more staff are likely to be submitted).

Double-weighting

The 1994 group accepts the need for the double-weighting of outputs in some subject areas, provided that clear guidelines as to what will be eligible to be double weighted are provided at an early stage in the process. Double-weighting did not work well in RAE 2008 due to a lack of clear up-front guidance to institutions.

Consultation question 3

What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing impact? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

Comments are especially welcomed on the following:

- how we propose to address the key challenges of time lags and attribution
- the type of evidence to be submitted, in the form of case studies and an impact statement supported by indicators (including comments on the initial template for case studies and menu of indicators at Annex D)
- the criteria for assessing impact and the definition of levels for the impact sub-profile
- the role of research users in assessing impact.

The 1994 Group welcomes the principle of including impact as one of the main assessment criteria and agrees with the proposal that impact must be rooted in excellent research in order to be rated highly. However, it is important that we wait until the Impact Pilot Scheme has been completed and thoroughly assessed before any final judgements are made on how it is integrated into the system. We believe there remains a substantial amount of work in order to define impact, clarify how it is to be assessed, and determine the correct weighting to be given to it. There also needs to be very careful consideration of how impact varies between disciplines, and how this should affect its assessment procedures.

We note and endorse HEFCE's recognition that assessing something so multi-faceted is necessarily a complex matter, and that in developing the methodology for assessment there is a need for close engagement with both academic and 'user' communities both in identifying appropriate indicators for different subject areas and in clarifying how these will be used by panels to generate impact profiles. The combination of case studies and an overall impact statement, both of which will be judged qualitatively by the panel, seems broadly appropriate. The suggested list of indicators needs to be broadened, however, to allow appropriate assessment of practice based research.

In addition, clarification is needed on the distinction between 'impact' and 'engagement' (paragraph 79c), and more detailed assessment criteria will have to be provided.

Clarification is also needed on the matter of attribution. On the one hand it is stated (para 61) that assessment of impact will focus on the submitted unit's contribution to impact "through activity undertaken within the unit during the assessment period building on excellent research (which may have been undertaken earlier ..)". However, there are references elsewhere (e.g. para 69) to indirect and non-linear contributions to impact, e.g. "through influencing further research undertaken elsewhere". It is therefore not clear whether it may be sufficient to show how research carried out within an HEI has produced impacts at a later date even where these were not actively driven or facilitated by the staff of the submitting unit subsequent to the conduct of the research itself. Were this insufficient, this would lead to an undue emphasis on derivative rather than original research.

We feel that the inclusion of users is important but they should have an advisory role. They may not be in a position to judge the 'excellence', or otherwise, of the original research, and may be biased towards simply assessing impact per se.

Consultation question 4

Do you have any comments on the proposed approach to assessing research environment?

The research environment is not emphasised to the same extent in the current consultation document as outputs or inputs. We therefore welcome HEFCE's re-assurance in discussion with the Group that environment remains as important a factor as in the previous exercise. However, we feel it is important to re-emphasise the importance of the environment factor, as we believe that its consideration of research income and postgraduate data make it an extremely important aspect of performance.

In terms of assessing the environment, the line between 'engagement', in this area, and 'impact', in the previous section, is unclear, and further clarification is needed. Furthermore, given the intention to move to fewer, larger, panels (particularly if multiple submissions to a single UoA are not allowed), it is important that the former RA5 is radically changed. Institutions should not be expected to tell any form of 'story' about how the research environment fits together in a coherent unit. We support the use of templates, requiring specific information, with much less scope for textual commentaries (and 'story' telling).

Finally, as noted above, the Group supports considerations of critical mass being part of the assessment of the environment, but would appreciate more clarification of what is meant by 'critical mass'. Panels will need to be very explicit about whether, and to what extent, it will be taken into account.

Consultation question 5

Do you agree with our proposals for combining and weighting the output, impact and environment sub-profiles? If not please propose an alternative and explain why this is preferable.

The 1994 group strongly agrees that research outputs should be given the highest weighting. However we feel that, for reasons stated above, the research environment should be given more weight than the consultation document proposes.

We believe that a decision on the weighting given to impact should be determined only after the robustness of its assessment is tested through the pilot study. The majority of members believe that the high weighting currently being proposed should only be retained if the pilot exercise provides clear evidence of robustness. If not, a phased introduction would be a more acceptable solution; for example, in the first round of REF setting impact at 15% (with environment at 20% and outputs at 65%), with the aspiration to increase this in future rounds.

Finally, we would appreciate further clarification of the statement that "the REF should give differentially greater recognition where units demonstrate excellence in all three areas" (paragraph 83c).

Consultation question 6

What comments do you have on the panel configuration proposed at Annex E? Where suggesting alternative options for specific UoAs, please provide the reasons for this.

We appreciate the need to reduce the number of UoAs and main panels, and believe that this will ensure greater consistency of assessment, although a few of our members are concerned that the number has been reduced too far. In addition, some of the proposed groupings have been questioned by our members and, given the inevitable difference in the views of our universities as a result of their varying internal structures, we are leaving it to individual member institutions to represent their particular positions on this issue.

However, the majority of members have concerns about the amalgamation of the six engineering panels. Doing this would create by far the largest UoA in the REF (using RAE 2008 submission data it would include 4456 FTEs, which is 25% more than the next largest UoA, Clinical Medicine, and 164% larger than Physics, which has its own UoA). It would also mask the significant differences which exist between the engineering disciplines, caused by them being fundamentally different in nature. For example, the RAE 2008 submission data shows significant differences between the engineering disciplines in terms of numerical data (research income, numbers of doctorates, etc), which means they are not easily comparable by using such metrics.

Given that one aim of reducing the number of UoAs is to reduce burden, we would be concerned if institutions had total freedom to make multiple submissions to individual UoAs. However, as noted above, any restriction on multiple submissions needs to be coupled with removal of the need for submissions to portray a single, coherent, research environment in whatever replaces the former RA5. Whatever HEFCE decides on this issue needs to be communicated to institutions as soon as possible. If multiple submissions are allowed, institutions will need to know by late 2010 whether any cases for such submissions are allowable or not.

Consultation question 7

Do you agree with the proposed approach to ensuring consistency between panels?

Consistency (or lack of it) across panels was a very major issue in the RAE2008 and we strongly endorse attempts to ensure there is a much greater degree of consistency in the REF. It is important that there is clear guidance and a much more robust examination of the preliminary results of panels before they are released; this should include a willingness to revisit assessments if they are found to be very out of line with other panels, with no strong reason for this.

Consultation question 9

Do you agree that our proposed approach will ensure that interdisciplinary research is assessed on an equal footing with other types of research? Are there further measures we should consider to ensure that this is the case and that our approach is well understood?

RCUK flags interdisciplinarity as key to our ability to address major research problems, and it is important that HEFCE does all it can to ensure that interdisciplinary research is fairly assessed in REF. Simply introducing a 'tick box' for institutions to mark (as was the case in the last RAE) is not sufficient, as panels had no guidance on how to use this information. Similarly, cross referral has not worked well in previous RAE's. Ensuring an appropriate

number and breadth of panel members and co-members will help to reduce the problems associated with assessing interdisciplinary research.

Consultation question 10

Do you agree that our proposals for encouraging and supporting researcher mobility will have a positive effect; and are there other measures that should be taken within the REF to this end?

We welcome the encouragement to researcher mobility between academic and non-academic settings, but clarification is needed concerning the basis on which staff who have moved between sectors may submit fewer than the maximum number of outputs.

Consultation question 11

Are there any further ways in which we could improve the measures to promote equalities and diversity?

We strongly support the proposal to have a central group to oversee equality and diversity, in terms of criteria setting and advising on the consideration of cases. This will reduce panel workload and ensure a more consistent approach across panels. As noted above, the 1994 group welcomes the proposal for HESA to collect data about all eligible staff for the purposes of equal opportunities monitoring, and believe that the 'equalities and diversity group' should record and publish data relating to both staff who are submitted in REF and those who are not.

Consultation question 12

Do you have any comments about the proposed timetable?

The majority of our members feel that although the timetable is tight, it would be possible to work with this provided that the assessment of the impact pilot study is published as early as possible and that panel criteria are published in early 2011.

Consultation question 13

Are there any further areas in which we could reduce burden, without compromising the robustness of the process?

We would support the suggestion of not allowing institutions to make very small submissions to particular UoAs (e.g. fewer than 5 fte). This would reduce burden for both institutions and panels and, given the larger, broader, panels, should not be an issue in relation to certain vulnerable subjects

We also support the intention to make greater use of HESA data for capturing information about the research environment (particularly research income and PGR numbers). Clearly there are many practical issues associated with this if HEFCE only allows institutions to include research income and students associated with submitted staff. It might be worth considering assessing research income and student data for the unit as a whole.