

Academy of Social Sciences response to Lord Stern's Review of the Research Excellence Framework

Introduction

1. The Academy of Social Sciences is the national academy of academics, learned societies and practitioners in the social sciences. Its mission is to promote social science in the United Kingdom for the public benefit. It is composed of around 1000 individual Fellows, 41 Learned Societies, and a number of affiliate members, together representing nearly 90,000 social scientists. We focus our responses on two aspects of the consultation.
2. First, we are particularly concerned to ensure consideration of the effects of any changes in the REF on social science disciplines and social science more generally. Second, we would argue for better use of evidence and methods, much of it from the social sciences, to consider the implications of any proposed changes and their incentives and disincentives at disciplinary, institutional and individual levels before final decisions are made. We note below some aspects on which we believe further modelling may be helpful.

Question 1. What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?

3. REF is a fundamental pillar of the dual support system. It provides funding stability and sustains a more diverse ecosystem of research funding and decision-making than the research council system alone. It preserves the link between QR and the full range of disciplines, whereas funding by research council overheads would be driven primarily by big science. It helps HEI institutional decision-making by benchmarking strengths across the piece, especially important since social sciences (and humanities) account for such a large proportion of university staff and students. Any move to conflate the two arms of dual support by awarding QR by research council overheads would breach the principle of pluralism and reduce accountability across disciplines. In some correlational analyses we have seen comparing allocation by research council overhead with current QR, institutions that are strong in social sciences but with little biomedical or physical science appear as outliers. Such a move would also result in greater incentives to seek research council funding when other funding (or none) was appropriate. Significant deadweight and demand management issues could arise if incentives were to drive up research council applications.
4. There is also the matter of charity and business QR; the criteria of these funders are often more concerned with impact than research councils. REF captures both the

outputs and the impacts of the work that attracts charity and business QR, assessing research excellence wherever it is found using trusted peer-review.

5. For the reasons set out in *The Metric Tide*, we do not believe a wholesale move to metrics is appropriate. More use may be made of citation data by some disciplines, but we believe there are particular problems with any move to ‘metricate’ research assessments of the social sciences (as well as the humanities). One particular issue is the priority given to journal publication, but others are also set out in that report.
6. There are, however, ways by which the administrative burden – for submitting institutions and individuals, and for assessors – could be reduced. Options might include:
 - a. **Remove or reduce the scope for selection of staff submitted for REF.** Evidence suggests that this accounts for a significant fraction of the cost to submitting institutions as they model submission strategies.
 - b. **Reduce the number of outputs required.** A relevant question is whether the aim is to incentivise volume or quality of research. We believe that gains in research productivity will retain importance for institutional and departmental strategies, if only to generate a sufficiently large population of outputs to choose between. Reduction in the number of outputs would also be likely to reduce some of the difficulties for early career researchers, and other categories eligible for reduced submission rates.
 - c. **Sampling of outputs.** This might be applied differentially to high volume UoAs, or might be stratified in a number of ways (by self-nominated excellence score, categories of researchers, interdisciplinary research, etc.). This would require extensive modelling using 2014 REF results, but could reduce the burden on assessors in high volume areas.
 - d. **Reconsider the Environment/ Impact templates.** Evidence supports combining the environment and impact templates for each submitting UoA, and greater use of agreed metrics showing the institutional contribution and outputs would be beneficial. If informed by evidence, this would help both assessment and incentives. Metrics could make use of data already collected by institutions, and could drive positive change at the institutional level by including aspects it is desirable to encourage, such as investment in interdisciplinary research, strategic investments in UoAs, early career researchers, external funding, doctoral completion rates, links between research and teaching, and ‘engagement’ (as distinct from impact).
 - e. **Reduce the number (not the weight) of impact case studies.** We strongly favour the continued inclusion of impact case studies; the RAEs before the 2014 REF positively dis-incentivised investment in impact, by institutions and individuals. But if the aim is to focus on quality and ensure there are sufficient

incentives for impact, a reduction in the *number* of case studies would seem possible; there is no need to incentivise volume *per se*. If combined with submission of all research-active staff, it would also reduce the costs to submitting institutions of modelling interaction of staff selection with impact case study selection.

- f. **Develop the case study approach to encourage impact based on more than one piece of research.** Existing evidence about how social science produces ‘impact’ shows there is rarely a linear link between a single piece of research and impact; impact often results from a body of research or the human capital associated with producing it. While we agree with recommendations (see *The Metric Tide*) to encourage greater standardisation of some numerical measures of claimed impact (impact measures based on monetary values or lives saved) when appropriate, we believe that any wholesale move to ‘metricate’ impact would be counter-productive. Many social science impacts (for policy or practice) cannot easily be quantitatively measured, and metrics tend to focus attention on process elements or engagement, rather than outcomes. The introduction of ‘impact’ was clearly successful in altering institutional practice, and retention of a case study model should allow for further development and increased support for such work.

7. For any change, we think clear modelling based on 2014 REF data would be essential and new recommendations should be the subject of detailed consultation, to consider how particular proposals might produce unintended consequences, for institutional, disciplinary or individual behaviours.

Question 2. If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?

8. We believe that UoAs should continue to be the basis for output returns and impact case studies. This is essential if REF is to help with disciplinary benchmarking and feedback for HEI’s forward investment strategies. While we agree that the Environment/ Impact templates have some institutional elements, we consider on balance that showing what the institution is doing in each Unit of Assessment is crucial to ensuring HEIs focus on the different needs of different disciplines. However some measures could be considered at a faculty level (or given as a faculty-wide response in UoA templates).
9. The Environment/ Impact templates could consider discussions about particular interdisciplinary investments, actions or structural measures *relevant to those*

disciplines. Interdisciplinary work is not about crossing all disciplines but about the need for specific issues or intellectual matters to involve particular constellations of disciplines. So even this could be addressed at UoA level, with relevant information appearing in more than one template from the institution. We note too that there are other tools for promoting interdisciplinary work (special funding, including cross-council research programmes, the new Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Research UK itself not the least among them). It is not necessary to replicate all the incentives from other parts of the system; it is merely important that REF incentives do not work against the other incentives in the funding system. Institution-wide metrics that are relevant can be copied into UoA based Environment/ impact templates as relevant.

10. We note that there have been suggestions about decoupling output submissions from individuals, and some indeed suggest assigning these only at institutional level. Such a radical move would affect the health of various disciplines; we believe it important to continue the link between outputs and impact to UoAs, not merely aggregate to institutional level. Otherwise, pressures for stratification (which exist for a host of reasons) are likely to have unintended differential effects on the health of a range of disciplines within the UK. For instance, the 'desirable' degree of stratification for social science is certainly less than for many physical sciences which require large physical overheads. In social sciences, a small group of researchers can produce high quality research, with strong impact. Acknowledging this and having a wider degree of spread in research, which is also important to teaching, requires consideration of the differing features of different disciplines.
11. Finally we believe that attempts to aggregate UoAs are extremely costly in transaction costs (even as a one-off) for HEIs and likely to reduce the information available to HEIs to inform their strategies for different disciplines and departments and even to assess interdisciplinary strengths.

Question 3. What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?

12. The Academy of Social Sciences has seen increasingly sophisticated use of REF information, both about outputs and impact, to inform differential institutional strategies by HEIs. While REF evidence is not the sole driver, it has provided a robust process of peer-based benchmarking to help HEIs assess the strengths and weaknesses of their social science departments, disciplines and interdisciplinary work. As such, while it is of course a snapshot at a moment in time, it informs a forward-looking appraisal of areas where investment may build on existing strengths.

An important feature is the transparency of the assessment of the UoA ratings. It not only allows UoAs to argue for retention of some of the QR they generate for investment but for UoAs and institutions to consider this in relation to their teaching strengths, and impact strategies too. This can include examples of innovative policies to allow bidding for start-up funding, impact funding and so on. We note for instance that RAE assessments and institutional strategies had an important positive effect in the investment of funds for the Q-Step programme.

Question 4. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?

13. A first emphasis should be on how to make the data collected from REF more accessible to funders, government and institutions, to provide better feedback loops for the evidence collected. We note the recommendations from *The Metric Tide* to ensure that submissions from individuals could be tracked over time (via an ORCID number) and other recommendations including the use of key words and funders in impact case studies. If the Environment and Impact templates were combined and contained more numerical data to an agreed template, that might allow easier comparison of such matters as support for early career researchers, strategic investments, open access publishing, extent of interdisciplinary support and in what fields, and inter-institution collaboration. This would allow a more open discussion of these strategic and structural issues; we believe this would be beneficial in the development of forward-planning across a host of stakeholders.
14. The addition of key words and trackable mentions of funders in the impact templates would allow their wider use by a range of research funders, and help them in their own future planning and assessment of their impact.

Question 5. How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?

15. We have noted that some measures of interdisciplinary activities, investments, and funding could be included in a combined Environment / Impact template, though it need not attempt to capture all the other incentives in the system. The same is true of collaborations between HEIs or other partners, including charities, or private sector (which are often organised on a disciplinary basis). This might also require the use of agreed interdisciplinary identifiers in REF submissions. We understand that REF 2014 was better than its predecessors as ensuring early identification and assessment across panels of interdisciplinary work but we suspect further improvements are possible. These might include careful choice of panel members

who can lead assessment of interdisciplinary research likely to arise in particular panels. Submission of jointly-authored interdisciplinary work to more than one panel seems an essential element if interdisciplinary work is not to be disadvantaged.

Question 6. In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and / or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g. success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming the system?

16. Any system of assessment will have both positive and negative effects; the aim should be to focus on the positive behaviours the system seeks to promote and reduce as far as possible negative effects. We have suggested ways to reduce 'gaming' (and costs) around the selection of staff for submission, though this will undoubtedly require some attention to HESA definitions. We are aware that this may result in some contractual changes (to teaching only contracts) but if this were accompanied by a reduction in the number of research outputs required per staff member, this would be attenuated. In addition, employment law and practice provide safeguards. A further counterweight would be the requirement of evidence about the role of research active staff in teaching (at undergraduate and postgraduate levels). This will also require attention to the incentives created by the metrics for the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework, as competition for students will continue to place weight on the importance of the relationship between the quality of teaching and its links with research (including data labs led by postgraduates). It is important that the two systems should be mutually reinforcing, rather than contradictory.
17. We have suggested that measures of issues such as treatment of early career researchers and research advancement could be required in the Environment/ Impact templates, which would provide positive incentives for institutional strategic developments. Virtually all HEIs use QR funds as the basis for development of, and negotiation about, wider institutional strategies of comparative advantage. Few HEIs treat QR funds as wholly belonging to the centre or as always flowing to the UoA that generated them but use them in mixed economy of institution-wide planning and discussion. This is made easier by the transparency of the process and the fact that UoAs and central institutional planners alike have access to them. This may be especially important in developing plans for emerging areas of research, where it may take some time before significant sums of external funding are achieved. In this sense, despite being retrospective, we believe QR funding based on sources other than research council overheads has an important influence on the ability of institutions to take risks in developing new areas of research.

18. We note that reduction in the number of outputs and impact case studies required would result in a stronger emphasis on quality, as well as reducing costs of submission and assessment. This may have particular import for the social sciences and humanities, where output volumes may be lower on average than in natural and physical sciences, and where some (such as books) typically take longer to achieve.

This might also improve the position (and reduce the gaming) around early career researchers.

19. Finally, we note that allowing the submission of fractional submissions for non-UK based academics (often buying them in for their 'summer months' to bolster outputs) does not demonstrably result in improvements to UK HEIs and we think it would be helpful to consider this issue both in principle and through modelling of costs and benefits.

Question 7. In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?

20. We have covered these issues above, including the issues of the relationship between teaching and research, degree of stratification and the importance of interdisciplinary research. The REF has had an effect on the development of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of UK social science disciplines, both at an institutional level and for particular disciplines, as demonstrated in the REF 2014 Panel Overview Report from Panel C. The inclusion of impact, as well as outputs, has had further effects. Recognition of the relative weakness of quantitative research in some disciplines has sparked useful wider discussions, including about panel composition, and some disciplines have had to re-consider wider disciplinary attention to impact. There are of course processes other than REF that raise these issues, but we believe that a REF-type approach is a useful structural element in these wider discussions.

Question 8. How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?

21. Again, we have to a large extent covered these issues above. The importance of QR funding as a source of non-hypothocated funding for institution-level discussion and negotiation ensures that the importance of such funds in strategic future planning is a result of wide and transparent discussions involving departments, faculties and wider institutional priorities. We are strongly of the view that these decisions should be taken at institutional level: priorities are influenced by the system-wide incentives,

but the interest of having a diverse sector in which institutions may take different pathways to excellence means that we do not think that REF funding should be tied to instructions on how to use QR funds. Other factors (global and national student recruitment and so on) also play a role. But REF gives information to institutions and UoAs alike, and recognising that different institutions will have different strengths preserves the strength and diversity of UK HEIs.

Question 9. Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?

22. This is a time of great architectural change for UK HEIs. The Nurse review and its recommendations, and the planned introduction of the TEF will bring change and challenges. We have said it is important that these different elements do not seek to duplicate one another, but that, while they should give scope for diverse strategies, the incentive and behavioural effects of each should be considered carefully, where possible using modelling based on empirical data, to ensure that they do not work against one another. Moreover they need to acknowledge that the analytical distinctions on which they are based (disciplinary vs interdisciplinary research, institution-based vs national strategies, teaching vs research) are all empirically mixed in individual HEIs. Where possible incentives should be mutually reinforcing or distinct, rather than contradicting one another.
23. Concrete proposals – for metrics for the TEF, for incentives for interdisciplinary research, for measures of student completion rates at undergraduate and postgraduate level – should be considered and where possible modelled in the round and subject to a further detailed consultation about proposal. This would ensure continued thriving of the successful HEI sector in all its diversity, and reduce the likelihood of unintended consequences for the system as a whole, not least in ensuring the capacity for gaming the system in the new architecture are limited.
24. We draw attention to the evidence we submitted to the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills Consultation on Higher Education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice in January 2016 (<https://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Acss-CfSS-response-to-BIS-HE-green-paper-Jan-2016-1.pdf>); the evidence presented in response to Q.27 is still pertinent.
25. Finally, we note that the transaction costs in any radical changes to REF will be considerable, and attention should be paid to this too, both in the content and the timing of the next REF.

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