



BERA Consultation Response

Research Excellence Framework Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research

Full information on the Research Excellence Framework can be found at:

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/>

The consultation documentation can be found at:

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_38/

Consultation questions

(Boxes for responses can be expanded to the desired length.)

Consultation question 1:

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

- 1.1 BERA agrees with many of the key features of the REF. In particular it accepts the aims of the REF as set out in paragraphs 14 and 15 and the focus on identifying research excellence. It welcomes the broad definition of research, the centrality of the assessment of research outputs as indicators of excellence and the recognition that this assessment is best done by peer review. BERA further welcomes the continued use of criteria of originality, rigour and significance in judging research excellence.
- 1.2 BERA is concerned, however, with the ambiguity and overlap between the key features of quality, environment and impact in the assessment framework. We agree with the submission from UCET that i) the concept of significance should be clarified as academic significance only or, in addition, incorporating actual or potential use beyond the academic sphere as stated in paragraph 39; ii) the current criteria for assessing engagement overlap with those of impact – one can have one without the other. Thus, for example, the amount and extent of collaboration with the full range of research users cited as evidence of impact in paragraph 63 is, in our view, more appropriately conceptualised as evidence of engagement. One could have a great deal of engagement but little or no impact and it is theoretically possible to have impact with researchers having little public engagement – engagement being done by others. iii) Paragraph 68 suggests that impact achieved through engagement done by others will not be credited. Even if such a position were defensible, it may be difficult to distinguish 'internal' and 'external' contributions to impact. iv) If panels are interested only in the impact of high quality research this needs to be made clear. Experience suggests that the elements of quality, impact and environment will be separately assessed and so if case studies are to be used these should be related to outputs of high quality to avoid game playing.
- 1.3 The emphasis given to impact in assessing research quality, risks compromising the independence of research especially in a field such as education where policy is inevitably influenced by the values of policy makers. Research, however excellent, which challenges these values is unlikely to have an impact even in the proposed time frames for assessing

impact. For example, research challenging the desirability of selecting young people at the age of 11 to attend grammar or secondary modern schools was not in itself sufficient to change policy. The key to policy change was the ideological commitment of the Labour government in the 1960s. Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s with a different ideological stance changed tack and began reintroducing selection. Selection remains a contentious matter today.

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.

2.1 BERA agrees that it is for institutions to determine which staff and which outputs should be assessed. We welcome the proposal that HESA should publish statistics about the proportion of staff selected for assessment after the completion of the REF. The Funding Councils might ask institutions for a copy of their guidance on the selection of staff and outputs, highlighting equality issues (or audit a sample of institutions). The funding councils should give clear guidance as to eligibility of staff, particularly in the case of those holding research assistant or research fellow posts who may not have been PIs but who nevertheless have published outputs. In addition it would be useful to provide guidance on the minimum fraction of contracts which would provide evidence of the connection between the work of staff on fractional contracts and the submitted unit. Another type of evidence might include the length of time staff on fractional contracts have been associated with the unit of assessment. We recognise that this is not straightforward.

2.2 BERA welcomes the assurance that all types of high quality research outputs are to be assessed including applied research.

2.3 We remain of the view that citation based approaches to measuring quality are inappropriate in the social sciences. We are reassured by paragraph 27c.

2.4 We support the reduction in the number of outputs from 4 to 3 as signalling an emphasis on quality rather than volume and in reducing the workload for panels.

2.5 Double weighting is welcome as long as the criteria for this are clear and are made available in good time.

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.

3.1 BERA accepts that some attention to impact is desirable given the investment in research across the sector. However, this is a very difficult area for education (see 1.3 above). We welcome the wide definition of impact and the intention to assess impact 'built on a portfolio of research activity over time.' Sub-panels should decide on indicators and on detailed impact criteria. The proposed descriptions of impact ratings are confusing. They draw on several criteria in ways that have not been made explicit or justified, for example 'ground breaking' is a criterion for four star impact compared to 'incremental' for one star. This could imply that small improvements in the lives of many are less valued than a major improvement in the lives of a few. A small change in teaching practice, for instance, which contributes to improvements in pupils' learning is apparently less valued than a ground breaking cure for a very rare cancer. Both kinds of impact are surely important and scale and depth of impact should both be valued. Paragraph 59a and the draft case study template do not recognise the value of both scale and depth.

3.2 We support the approach taken to time lag but would also welcome consideration of how to assess impact of research that prevented something happening – for example via evaluation of initiatives that meant they were not taken forward.

3.3 We support the narrative approach of case studies and the approach of giving outlets the responsibility of choosing appropriate indicators from a common menu.

3.4 Given the acknowledged complexities of assessing impact, we would support the whole panel being involved in making judgements. User perspectives, while important, are not in themselves sufficient for this exercise. This is particularly the case where research has prevented something happening.

Consultation question 4:

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

4.1 This is broadly acceptable.

4.2 There is some concern about the term critical mass. It might be useful to illustrate the meaning of this term, distinguishing a large number of researchers in a unit of assessment who are working in isolation from each other, from groups of researchers working on related problems. It is also the case that critical mass is not so important in some theoretical areas. While we can see that critical mass is important when considering aspects of sustainability, units of assessment with very small numbers could be asked to demonstrate how sustainability would be achieved.

4.3 in a context in which particular minority interest research is sustained by cross-institutional (including international) collaboration 'critical mass' should not be defined in narrowly institutional terms.

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.

5.1 BERA agrees that the three sub-profiles should be combined into an overall profile.

5.2 We are concerned about the weighting given to impact given the lack of experience in assessing this area and in the use of case studies. We would suggest that between 10 and 15% should be allocated to this sub-profile. We would recommend an increased weighting for environment to reflect REF's role in maintaining the longer-term sustainability of the research base (as stated in paragraph 15f), while retaining the 70% for quality of outputs.

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.

6.1 We understand the need to have fewer panels and are content with where Education is situated.

6.2 We would urge caution on the idea of associated/part-time membership of panels. Panels build up a shared understanding of criteria and evidence and the 2008 exercise provided evidence that the use of part-time members reduced the reliability of assessments.

Consultation question 7:

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

Yes. This is absolutely essential to the credibility of the exercise. It would be helpful to have greater transparency around the mechanisms for cross-referencing between panels.

Consultation question 8:

Do you have any suggested additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies? (If suggesting additional bodies, please provide their names and addresses and indicate how they are qualified to make nominations.)

No. An extensive list has been provided.

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?

Yes. It will be important to have researchers well recognised for their interdisciplinary work on the panels.

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?

Yes.

Consultation question 11:

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

The proposals in paragraphs 111 and 112 are helpful. Signalling the intention to audit the practices of a sample of institutions will also be helpful. We welcome the intention to provide centralised guidance for individual staff circumstances. Guidance for REF-specific equalities training would also be welcome.

Consultation question 12:

Do you have any comments about the proposed timetable?

12.1 The timetable is extremely ambitious given the innovations for REF. We do not think that much would be lost by delaying the census date by one year and there is much to be gained. In particular given the proposed weighting of Impact there is insufficient time to develop robust Impact measuring methods. Premature use of contested and untried methods risks jeopardising the credibility of the REF.

12.2 There are also implications for equity. The shorter census period means that circumstances that ought to be taken into account for an individual (maternity leave, sick leave and so forth) ought to go back into the pre-census period as it is there that the work likely to be reported in outputs will have started in many cases.

Consultation question 13:

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

The largest burden will be where institutions need to collect new data. The assessment of impact falls into this category and therefore clear guidance is essential.

Consultation question 14:

Do you have any other comments on the proposals?

No.