

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg
Uwch Cymru
Higher Education Funding
Council for Wales

Cwrt Linden
Clos Ilex Llanisien
Caerdydd CF14 5DZ
Ffôn 029 2076 1861
Ffacs 029 2076 3163
www.hefcw.ac.uk

Linden Court
Ilex Close Llanishen
Cardiff CF14 5DZ
Tel 029 2076 1861
Fax 029 2076 3163
www.hefcw.ac.uk

hefcw

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Circular

Research Excellence Framework: Consultation Outcomes

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Response by: No response required
Contact: Name: Linda Tiller
Telephone: 029 2068 2228
Email: linda.tiller@hefcw.ac.uk

The four UK higher education funding bodies recently consulted on proposals for the future arrangements for the assessment and funding of research – the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This Circular provides information about the high-level outcomes of the consultation and the next steps in implementing the REF.

This document is available online, in large print, Braille, on CD and on audio CD and cassette. Should you or someone you know require this in an alternative format, please contact us on (029) 2068 2280 or email info@hefcw.ac.uk.

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1. The four UK higher education funding bodies recently consulted on proposals for the future arrangements for the assessment and funding of research – the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Circular W09/30HE). This Circular provides information about the high-level outcomes of the consultation and the next steps in implementing the REF. Similar Circulars are being issued in the other parts of the UK.

Consultation responses

2. Across the UK, the funding bodies received 534 responses. We would like to thank respondents for their thoughtful and constructive input, which will help to ensure we develop arrangements that will carry the confidence of key stakeholders.
3. Across the responses there was overwhelming support for:
 - the continuation of block-grant research funding as part of the dual support system, to be allocated on the basis of research excellence
 - research excellence to continue to be assessed through a process of expert review, informed by indicators, and to be assessed on a UK-wide basis with reference to international standards
 - the quality of research outputs to continue to be the primary factor in the assessment, and the vitality of the research environment also to be a significant factor.
4. There was widespread support in principle for including an element for the explicit assessment of impact within the REF from higher education institutions, mission groups, the national academies, research user representatives and other funders of research, and from a clear majority of academic subject associations. Many qualified their support by emphasising the need to develop a robust method for assessing impact, and suggested the weighting for this element within the overall quality assessment should be lower than the proposed 25 per cent. A significant minority of responses objected to our proposals for the assessment of impact, and as an initial response to this we set out in Annex A some ways in which the proposals we are developing will meet their concerns.
5. Responses provided a wealth of feedback on all the key issues on which we had consulted. A UK-wide summary of the responses, prepared by HEFCE, is now available at www.hefce.ac.uk/ref alongside the consultation document.
6. The responses which HEFCW received from Welsh HEIs and other respondents in Wales were generally consistent with those for the UK as a whole. There were, however, two specific additional issues raised in

responses from Wales. These were: (i) the need to ensure that panels do not undervalue the impact of research which has a focus within one of the devolved administrations (e.g. research to inform WAG policy) and (ii) concerns in relation to the position of Celtic Studies in the new panel structure. These issues have broader applicability and the funding bodies will work together to address them as the REF continues to develop.

Initial decisions and next steps

7. In the light of the consultation feedback the UK funding bodies have taken initial decisions on many key aspects of the design of the REF, with the main exceptions being the configuration of panels, the method for assessing impact, and the weightings between outputs, impact and environment. The funding bodies are considering the overall timetable for the completion of the first REF exercise, in the light of feedback from the consultation and the refinements we are making.
8. Initial decisions about the REF and the basis for taking forward the assessment of impact are set out at Annex A.
9. Further details about these decisions, as well as the panel configuration and details of the process for recruiting panels will be published later in the year. The method for assessing impact and the weightings between the three elements will be determined after the current impact pilot exercise has concluded in autumn 2010.
10. At this stage the funding bodies are:
 - a. **Progressing with the impact pilot exercise.** All 29 pilot institutions have now made their submissions and expert panels have been recruited for the five pilot Units of Assessment, to assess the submissions and report on the lessons learned. Each pilot panel includes a broadly even mix of leading researchers and prominent, highly qualified representatives of the audiences, beneficiaries and users of research from across a wide range of sectors relevant to each Unit of Assessment. Further details are available at www.hefce.ac.uk/ref.
 - b. **Inviting applicants for the roles of Chairs Designate for the REF main panels.** In the light of widespread support for this proposal, there will be four main panels¹, and the funding bodies wish to make an early start in appointing Chairs Designate to these. Initially they will advise on the further planning and design of the assessment framework, before taking up their roles as Main Panel Chairs once

¹ There was also widespread support for rationalising the sub-panels, but we are still working on the configuration of a number of specific sub-panels, taking account of the consultation feedback.

the panels are in place. Further particulars are available at www.hefce.ac.uk/ref.

- c. **Establishing an expert group to advise on strengthening measures to promote equalities and diversity in the REF**, as outlined at Annex A, paragraphs 30-31.

11. As work proceeds, the funding bodies are keen to have continuing, extensive dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, especially in developing the impact element. As part of this, the funding bodies are sponsoring Kings College London to hold a UK-wide conference in June to discuss the progress of the pilot exercise. Details will be available shortly.

Further information

12. Further details are available on the REF section of the HEFCE web-site, www.hefce.ac.uk/ref, including:
- the summary of consultation responses
 - the advertisement and further particulars for applications to become Main Panel Chair Designate
 - details about the impact pilot exercise, including membership of the Impact Pilot Expert Panels.
13. For further information contact Linda Tiller, HEFCW (tel 029 2068 2228; email linda.tiller@hefcw.ac.uk).

Initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework

1. In the light of responses to the consultation (Circular W09/30HE), the UK funding bodies have taken the following initial decisions about the REF.

General features

2. For the purposes of the REF, research will be defined as ‘a process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared’.
3. The assessment outcomes will be a product of expert review, informed by indicators where appropriate.
4. The assessment will be undertaken by an expert sub-panel to be established for each of 30 to 40 Units of Assessment (UOAs), working under the guidance of four broad main panels. Each sub-panel will assess work within its discipline or area of research, with the main panels ensuring common procedures and consistent application of the overall assessment standards.
5. For each submission, three distinct elements will be assessed: output quality, impact and environment. Output quality will be the dominant element, with a significant weighting for each of impact and environment.

Outcomes

6. The outcomes of the overall assessment will be sufficiently fine-grained to identify excellence wherever this may be found. Panels will produce a sub-profile for each element, to be combined into an overall excellence profile. Each sub-profile and the overall profile will be on a five-point scale (1* to 4* and Unclassified). Definitions of these levels in the sub-profiles and overall profile will be refined and finalised in consultation with the expert panels.

Assessment of output quality

7. Higher education institutions (HEIs) will be invited to select staff whose outputs are to be assessed. The following categories of staff will be eligible for selection by institutions:
 - a. Research-active staff employed by the submitting institution. The previous definition of staff eligible to be submitted as ‘Category A’ will be tightened to include as eligible academic staff with a contract of

employment with the submitting HEI on the census date, whose primary employment function is to undertake either research or research and teaching. These will form the volume measure for funding purposes.

- b. Other research-active staff with a clear, defined relationship with the submitted unit. This will include staff employed by the NHS, Research Councils, charities or other organisations but, as we proposed, would exclude researchers with a less clearly defined relationship to the submitted unit. Outputs by these staff will inform the quality profiles, but the staff will not contribute to the volume measure for funding.
8. Research assistants and research fellows will be eligible by exception in the comparatively few cases where they have a sufficiently strong personal research record, in similar terms to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).
9. The proportion of eligible staff submitted will not be a significant factor in the assessment.
10. Institutions may submit a maximum of four outputs per member of staff. We will work with panels to develop more structured approaches to sampling outputs to be assessed in detail, and to define clear criteria for double-weighting outputs of exceptional scale and scope.
11. Early-career researchers and staff with individual circumstances that constrained their research activity during the assessment period may be submitted with fewer than the maximum number of outputs. There will be a consistent approach to the treatment of these circumstances, across the exercise. Other ways in which we will strengthen the measures to promote equality and diversity in the REF are outlined at paragraph 30.
12. The criteria for assessing the quality of outputs will be 'rigour, originality and significance'.
13. All types of outputs from research meeting our definition at paragraph 2 above will be eligible for submission, including 'grey literature' and practice-based outputs. All submitted outputs will need to include evidence of the research process, and present the insights in a form meeting the needs of its potential audiences.
14. We welcome the increasing publication of outputs in open access formats and the increasing use of institutional repositories. We intend to discuss with stakeholders how we could take this forward in future assessment exercises, recognising that some exceptions may be required (such as confidential reports for businesses).

15. We note the concerns about the costs and potential equalities implications of using citation information and will proceed with caution in making this available to some panels to inform their review of outputs, as follows:
 - a. Each sub-panel will be invited to decide whether it wishes to use citation information to inform its review of outputs. Panels will set out in their criteria statements whether or not they will use such data, and if so how, within a framework of central guidance, to ensure appropriate use of the data and to avoid any potential disadvantage to outputs for which citation data may not be available.
 - b. We will provide citation data to those panels using them in a standardised and simplified format. We will aim to procure the data and make them available to panels in a way that is transparent and available in an appropriate form to institutions – should they wish to use them to inform their selection of outputs – at minimal additional cost to institutions.
 - c. We will reconsider whether the benefits of incorporating citation information into the REF outweigh the costs if only a small minority of panels request citation information, the costs are high, or if the equalities implications cannot be effectively mitigated.
16. Panels will be able to request brief ‘output statements’ for pre-specified reasons as indicated below, where such types of information are widely applicable and necessary for the assessment of research in their UOA:
 - a. For user-focused or applied research outputs – a short statement to explain the actual or potential user significance of the output if this is not evident within the output itself.
 - b. For non-text or practice-based outputs (performances, artefacts and so on) – a short description of the research process where this is not evident within the output.
 - c. For collaborative or co-authored outputs – a short explanation of the contribution of the individual submitted researcher where this is necessary to inform the assessment.²

Assessing impact

17. We are still developing our proposals for the method of assessing research impact, including through the pilot exercise now in progress. We expect to make a full, detailed announcement later in the year reflecting

² Co-authored outputs may not be submitted more than once within the same submission; but may be submitted more than once in separate submissions (either by different institutions, or in separate submissions from one institution).

the experience of the pilots as well as points made in the consultation responses. We reiterate here the key principles and parameters that will underpin the approach that we are developing:

- a. Our aim is to identify and reward the impact that excellent research carried out within UK higher education is already achieving, and to encourage the sector to build on this to achieve the full potential impact across a broad range of research activity in the future.
- b. We embrace a wide definition of impact, including benefits to the economy, society, culture, public policy and services, health, the environment, international development and quality of life.
- c. We aim to assess historical impacts, not attempt to predict future impacts. The REF will assess impacts that have already occurred, underpinned by excellent research over a sufficiently long timeframe to allow the impacts to become evident.
- d. The REF will assess impact in terms of complete submissions covering a body of activity, not at the level of the individual researcher. The assessment will focus on selected case studies of impacts that have arisen from across a broad portfolio of research activity, and will not expect each submitted researcher to demonstrate the impact of their work.
- e. Our proposals aim to recognise and reward impacts arising from excellent research of all kinds. Given the evidence provided to us about impacts that have arisen from curiosity-driven research, rather than discourage such research the REF will provide full recognition where curiosity-driven research has benefitted the economy or society, in addition to rewarding excellent research of all kinds through the assessment of output quality.

18. Key elements in our assessment approach will therefore include:

- a. Enabling excellent research in all disciplines to demonstrate impacts according to criteria and indicators that are appropriate to research in each discipline-group, to be applied within a common assessment framework. A key aim of the pilot exercise is to work with experts in a range of disciplines to develop these, and the REF panels will develop them further in consultation with their communities.
- b. Producing outcomes of the assessment in the form of an 'impact sub-profile' for each submission; these will be the product of expert panels' judgements based on an appropriate mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence.
- c. A substantive input into the assessment of impact by representatives of the users, beneficiaries and wider audiences of research, working

in partnership with academics to develop the criteria and undertake the assessment.

- d. Recognition that multiple units can contribute to an impact, whether through collaborative or cross-disciplinary research, research in one discipline that informed work in another leading to impact, or several units' independent contributions to building up an influential body of knowledge.
- e. Keeping the burden on institutions of providing evidence to the minimum necessary to enable panels to make robust assessments.

Assessing the research environment

- 19. The quality and vitality of the research environment will be included as a significant factor in the assessment, broadly as proposed. We will undertake some further work in consultation with the expert panels to develop a generic template for institutions to submit relevant information about the research environment.
- 20. Given the move to broader-based UOAs, submissions will not be expected to relate to a single, coherent organisational structure.
- 21. Our current preference is to make use of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data as far as possible in collecting research student and income data. This would mean that research students and income would no longer be associated only with staff selected for the REF, but would reflect the overall numbers of research students and levels of income for the submitted unit as a whole. Further consideration will be given to this before a firm decision is taken.
- 22. We will take forward our proposals for considering critical mass within the environment element by asking panels to determine whether and how to take this into account, based on evidence about disciplinary factors, and within a common framework.

Units of Assessment and expert panels

- 23. There will be 30 to 40 sub-panels working under the guidance of four main panels. The number and scope of the sub-panels will be finalised through further consultation with key stakeholders, and published in due course.
- 24. We expect some of the sub-panels with large and diverse coverage to require special arrangements involving an overarching sub-panel and a number of sub-groups.

25. We will ensure greater consistency between the panels largely as proposed, including through:
- a clearly defined common framework for the assessment with more detailed generic guidance applicable to all panels, or all sub-panels within a main panel, and allowing flexibility for sub-panels to vary the guidance only in specific areas where justified by disciplinary differences
 - centralised guidance and processes to deal with individual staff circumstances
 - four broad main panels, with responsibility to ensure consistency among their sub-panels.
26. In the context of broader panels, multiple submissions will be allowed in exceptional cases. We are still considering whether it is more appropriate to make multiple submissions for all three elements in the assessment, or only of the outputs element.
27. As was the case in the RAE, joint submissions to one UOA by two or more HEIs of research they have undertaken collaboratively will be encouraged.

Interdisciplinary research

28. Interdisciplinary research will be supported as proposed, and in addition:
- we will aim to include members with specific interdisciplinary expertise on sub-panels
 - cross-panel membership will be encouraged in cases where there are strong connections across panels.

Researcher mobility

29. We will carry forward the proposals to support the mobility of researchers between higher education and other sectors. Panels will be encouraged to give due credit for the contribution to an institution's research made by researchers recruited from business or other sectors as well as academic staff spending time in other sectors.

Equalities and diversity

30. We will strengthen the measures to promote equalities and diversity, including:

- strengthening the guidance on institutional codes of practice for the selection of staff, building on the findings from the review of the 2008 RAE equalities measures³
 - more robust monitoring of the selection of staff for assessment, by tightening the definitions of eligible staff
 - a more consistent approach to the treatment of individual staff circumstances across the exercise
 - within the environment template, requiring clearer evidence that participating institutions are working to improve equality of opportunity and diversity of their academic workforce.
31. We are establishing an expert group to help take these measures forward and to advise on the equalities implications of using citation information and assessing impact in the REF.

Accountability burden

32. We will reduce the burden of research assessment in several areas outlined below, although (with the inclusion of impact) do not expect the overall level of burden to differ substantially to the 2008 RAE:
- fewer main panels and sub-panels operating more consistently
 - tighter definitions of eligible staff, especially those not employed by the submitting institution
 - using HESA data as far as possible for research student and research income data
 - use of templates for the narrative elements
 - for panels, greater use of sampling and/or double-weighted outputs.

³ See 'Impact of the process to promote equality and diversity in the Research Assessment Exercise 2008', available on the Equality Challenge Unit web-site www.ecu.ac.uk under Publications.