

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

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Circular

Research Excellence Framework: Outcomes of Consultation and Next Steps

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

This Circular provides further information on the next stage of the development of new arrangements for research assessment – the Research Excellence Framework.

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Introduction

- 1 This Circular provides further information on the next stage of the development of new arrangements for research assessment – the Research Excellence Framework.

Background

- 2 In November 2007, each of the UK higher education funding bodies published a consultation paper on future arrangements for research assessment – the Research Excellence Framework – to be introduced following the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (Circular W07/48HE refers). The consultation period closed in February 2008.
- 3 HEFCW received 17 responses from HEIs and other bodies and departments in Wales, together with copies of responses from a number of UK-wide organisations. Across the UK as a whole, 338 responses were submitted.
- 4 HEFCW reviewed the responses from institutions and other organisations in Wales before transmitting them to HEFCE for inclusion in a UK-wide analysis of all responses. This analysis was published electronically in April, and we alerted heads of institutions to its availability at that point. The analysis is available on the HEFCW website (www.hefcw.ac.uk) under Research/ Future Arrangements for Research Assessment, and is also available as Secondary Document alongside this Circular. A brief summary of the key points is attached at **Annex A**.

Consultation Responses from Wales

- 5 HEFCW is not bound by the implementation timetable for the new arrangements that applies in England. Our consultation document therefore also sought views on whether institutions in Wales would wish to join the new assessment arrangements as soon as they are introduced in England or prefer to wait. The majority of institutional respondents indicated that they would prefer to join the new assessment process at the same time as institutions in England. We envisage that we will take a decision on this matter in Summer 2009, following completion of the bibliometrics pilot exercise (see below), subject to any guidance which may be received from the Welsh Assembly Government. The way in which assessment outcomes will be used for funding purposes in Wales would be determined separately, in consultation with the sector.

Decisions arising from the Consultation

- 6 In the light of responses to the consultation, John Denham, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, has agreed two modifications to the proposals that were set out in the consultation paper:
- a) Responding to concerns about what would in effect be two discrete assessment regimes (one for the 'science-based' disciplines, and one for the other subjects), it has now been agreed to develop a more unified framework covering all disciplines, with variable internal geometry. In particular, bibliometric indicators of research quality will be a key element in quality assessment wherever this is appropriate, with expert review of research outputs retained where this is not. In both cases the bibliometric indicators/expert review will operate in concert with other indicators in varying combinations and with the nature and extent of the overall input from the expert panels tailored to each subject group.
 - b) To allow time for the development of this more flexible approach and to enable the new bibliometric indicator to be thoroughly piloted, the timetable previously announced for England for designing the new framework will be extended by twelve months.

Key features of a unified framework

- 7 The shape of a unified framework for quality assessment across all disciplines has now been established. In each subject, quality will be assessed using some or all of:
- a) Bibliometric indicators of quality or expert review of outputs (or possibly in some cases a combination of these)
 - b) Other quantitative indicators
 - c) Supplementary qualitative information.
- 8 The precise combination used for each subject group will vary as appropriate having regard to advice from the expert panels and to further consultation as appropriate. It is envisaged that bibliometrics and other quantitative indicators will be used to the extent that they are applicable to each subject. They will be supplemented or replaced by peer review of outputs, and supplemented by other qualitative elements where this is necessary to produce a robust assessment that fully reflects the range of research approaches and outputs characteristic of each subject group. It is anticipated that this will result in a spectrum of assessment approaches along a continuum, as follows:
- Some subjects may be assessed through bibliometrics in combination with other quantitative indicators only (where this approach is sufficiently

robust to be used without the need for qualitative elements or expert review of outputs)

- For subjects where bibliometrics and other quantitative indicators are partially informative, they would be used in combination with qualitative elements and possibly some expert review of outputs
 - For subjects where bibliometric indicators are not sufficiently mature to be informative, expert review of outputs would be used in combination with other applicable indicators and qualitative information.
- 9 Quality assessment in all subjects will be overseen by expert panels. Within an operational framework to be determined, the panels will advise on:
- Selecting indicators appropriate to the characteristics and diversity of research in their subject field
 - Interpreting and combining these indicators (together with peer review judgements as appropriate) to produce an overall quality profile that can be used to inform the allocation of the Council's grant for research
 - Ensuring that quality assessment is conducted for all subjects with equal rigour and applying common quality standards having regard to international benchmarks.
- 10 In England, the timetable for implementation will now be as follows. Assessment across all subjects will take place during calendar year 2013 to drive QR funding from academic year 2014-15. For subjects where bibliometric indicators play a leading role in quality assessment, these will start to influence funding phased in from 2011-12. A full exercise to produce bibliometric indicators of research quality will therefore take place, for appropriate subjects, in 2010. As indicated in paragraph 5 above, we envisage that we will take a decision on implementation timetables in Wales in Summer 2009, following completion of the bibliometrics pilot exercise.

Next steps

- 11 HEFCE, working in conjunction with the other HE funding bodies, will now lead a programme of work to develop the operational detail of the new framework, as follows:
- a) The bibliometric indicator will be piloted in 2008, as planned. The chosen approaches to data collection and analysis will be decided during 2009, with sufficient notice provided to institutions to prepare for a full bibliometrics exercise (in appropriate subject groups) which, in England, will be undertaken in 2010. Some details of what it is hoped the pilots will achieve and how it is planned to conduct them are set out

at **Annex B**. HEFCE has already written to institutions that have offered to take part in the pilots to set in hand the process of establishing the pilot group. It has been agreed that this group will include at least one institution from Wales.

- b) In parallel to the bibliometrics pilot, proposals for light-touch approaches to expert review of research outputs will be developed, to be applied in subjects where bibliometric indices do not yet provide a sufficiently robust quality measure
- c) Also in parallel, there will be work to develop the approach to choosing and using other quantitative and qualitative indicators, including approaches to capturing the significance and impact of research activity where this cannot be reliably established through bibliometric analysis; and for other aspects of the framework including the subject structure (recognising that the structure proposed in the recent consultations requires further thought) and the frequency of assessment.
- d) There will also be a full sector impact assessment of the REF, informed by the bibliometrics pilot, to understand the potential accountability burden, behavioural incentives, equal opportunities and sustainability implications.

12 Following the pilot and development of proposals for other aspects of the framework, the funding bodies will consult their sectors formally from spring 2009, leading to decisions on the way forward by summer 2009. This approach brings the timetable for developing the different aspects of the framework across all disciplines closer together.

13 The overall timetable is now as follows:

April 2008 – spring 2009	Undertake pilot of bibliometric indicators Develop proposals for other aspects of the REF across all subjects Assess the impact of our proposals in terms of equality and diversity, sustainability and regulatory burden.
December 2008	Results of 2008 RAE published
Spring - summer 2009	Consult on all main features of the REF including operational details of the bibliometrics process, use of other quantitative indicators, subject boundaries and procedures for light-touch peer review
Late summer 2009	Decide on the main operational features of the framework including what statistical and bibliometric datasets will be used

Note: <i>The following implementation timetable currently applies in England only</i>	
Calendar year 2010	<p>Establish expert panels for all subjects</p> <p>Undertake bibliometrics exercise in appropriate subjects</p> <p>Consult on choice and use of assessment components for each subject group</p>
2011-12	Metrics begin to inform an element of funding in appropriate subjects
Calendar year 2012	Submissions to 2013 light touch peer review process
2013	Undertake full assessment process for all subjects including light touch peer review
2014-15	Funding for all subjects driven by REF

Progress Updates

- 14 Information about the bibliometrics pilot and the development of proposals in other areas will be posted regularly on the HEFCE web-site (www.hefce.ac.uk) under Research/Research Excellence Framework.

Further Information

- 15 For further information contact Linda Tiller, HEFCW (tel 029 2068 2228; email linda.tiller@hefcw.ac.uk).

Summary of key points

This Annex, which was prepared by HEFCE on the basis of all UK responses, briefly summarises the key points made in response to the consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (W07/48HE). A full summary can be found at www.hefcw.ac.uk/Research_Docs/REF_response_analysis_UK_.pdf, and is also available as a Secondary Document alongside this Circular.

1. A number of key stakeholders prefaced their responses by expressing strong support for the dual support system of research funding, stating that the quality-related (QR) element of funding provided as a block grant by the funding bodies is vital for the health and success of the UK research base.
2. A number of responses welcomed or agreed with the proposed aims of the REF. In particular:
 - There was strong agreement that the Framework should support excellent research wherever it is found; that it should allocate QR selectively on basis of quality; and that it must therefore be based on robust measures of quality.
 - Many welcomed the intention to reduce burden, although they often observed a tension between reducing burden and maintaining the rigour and robustness of the assessment process.
 - There was unqualified support for a shared UK wide system of quality assessment.
3. Although there was support for greater use of quantitative indicators in the assessment and funding of research, there were widespread concerns about the likely implications of drawing a clear distinction between two main groups of subjects - 'science-based' and other disciplines – with a single and distinct approach to quality assessment for all subjects falling into each of these two groups. Respondents pointed to the implications of making the division so sharply, especially in cases where it was not clear to which group a discipline should belong or where a body of work was likely to straddle the boundary; and to the implications of applying the same assessment approach without variation to whole of the diverse range of disciplines within each group. Many respondents wanted to see a more unified system that varies the use of quantitative indicators and expert review, as applicable to each discipline. Some described this as a spectrum or continuum, ranging from 'metrics moderated by experts' on one side, to 'expert review informed by metrics' on the other, with a graduated range of more mixed approaches in between.

4. A clear majority of respondents expressed doubts as to whether a robust and workable assessment regime for science based disciplines can be developed, piloted and implemented within the timetable that was proposed for England. Many respondents requested that this should be extended by at least 12 months. They stressed the importance of conducting a thorough pilot with sufficient time to refine the proposals before implementation, and of giving HEIs sufficient notice of the operational detail of the new assessment regime before putting this into practice. Many also wished to see the timetables for the 'science-based' and other disciplines more closely aligned to strengthen the development of the new system as a cohesive whole.
5. Views about the proposed bibliometric indicator ranged from positive support to scepticism – and some respondents may not yet have grasped fully how this would work in detail. But there was a general consensus that:
 - Substantive further work is needed to develop the bibliometric process, validate the outcomes, and understand the behavioural consequences.
 - Citation measures can provide a useful proxy indicator of quality, but they should be used alongside other quality-related indicators rather than alone. Also, some form of moderation by expert panels would be desirable to ensure the citation measures are appropriately applied and interpreted across the subject groups, and to give confidence in the outcomes.
6. Respondents made proposals for other quantitative indicators that could be used alongside bibliometrics. Most were keen to find ways of capturing user value and the broader impact of research. But a significant minority felt this would best be addressed by other funding streams, and there was little consensus about how in practice impact could be measured.
7. Concerns were raised about the implications of operating at broad subject level for the 'science-based' disciplines. Many respondents felt this would limit the REF's usefulness in informing institutional research management and in providing public information to external stakeholders about where, and in what disciplines, excellent research takes place. Many also felt it would constrain the expertise within the panels. However, a significant minority argued that the REF should focus solely on allocating QR, and not seek to provide quality assessments at the same level of detail as the RAE. They argued that HEIs are now well-placed to take more formal responsibility internally for research management without relying on external assessments, and that a broader-brush approach is necessary for the burden to be reduced significantly.

8. There was general consensus that the REF is unlikely to reduce burden in the short-term, and may indeed be expected to involve a significant transitional workload, but many recognised the potential for reduced burden once in 'steady state'. Many – but not all – respondents urged us to consider a universal or automated approach to including staff for the bibliometrics exercise, rather than staff being selected by institutions, and saw this as the main potential to reduce burden. For the other subjects, there were general doubts that the burden of peer review could be significantly reduced without compromising rigour, although some avenues for further exploration were identified.

Outline of the bibliometric pilot exercise

1. HEFCE, on behalf of the UK higher education funding bodies, will run a pilot exercise in the construction of bibliometric indicators of research quality starting in early summer 2008. This will inform decisions about which subjects bibliometric indicators should be used for, how they can be used in creating quality profiles, and the design of the process for producing them.
2. A sample of pilot institutions will be selected which is broadly representative of the UK research base and includes HEIs with different characteristics. HEFCE has written to those institutions that expressed an interest, giving some further details of what the exercise may entail and asking them to answer some technical questions to help draw the sample. The pilot will include all disciplines in which there is at least moderate coverage of citation data, to inform later decisions about which subjects bibliometric indicators should be developed in and to explore boundary issues. It has been agreed that the sample for the pilot will include at least one institution from Wales.
3. In terms of the process and technical issues the pilot will explore:
 - a. Questions about the scope of the exercise. In the light of feedback from the consultation, the pilot will test both universal and selective approaches to including staff and papers, and explore whether papers should be credited to the institution at the time of publication, or 'follow' the author should they move to a different institution.
 - b. The timeframe and frequency of bibliometric exercises.
 - c. The process for collecting data about staff and papers to be included in the exercise, and the implications and workload for institutions.
 - d. Requirements for source citation data, including factors that may influence the choice between using the Web of Science, SCOPUS or both, and any requirements for cleaning the data prior to analysis. This will involve gaining access to both databases and conducting work to assess their completeness, accuracy and usability.
 - e. Methods of citation analysis. In the light of feedback to the consultation further work will be undertaken in particular on how to define 'fields' for the purposes of normalisation, and on the options for handling self-citation. There is a continued commitment to producing bibliometric indicators in the form of a profile. The

appropriate internal quality thresholds for building such a profile will be explored, together with the potential for generating additional or supplementary bibliometric statistics that could inform the creation of quality profiles or be useful to institutions for internal management purposes. There will also be consideration of how best to ensure that the indicators produced can be read against robust and meaningful international benchmark standards.

4. It is anticipated that the results of the pilot to be available in spring 2009. Advice will be taken from subject expert groups on: the pilot outcomes; on which subjects bibliometrics are usable for; and how they can be used/moderated, including investigation of unexpected results.
5. The funding bodies will work with the pilot institutions to share their experiences and the lessons learned with the sector as a whole.