



MEMORANDUM

To: REF Review, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills  
Subject: Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework  
Date: 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016

Dear Lord Nicholas Stern,

Please find herewith the joint response of the British Sociological Association and The Heads and Professors of Sociology to your consultation on the future of the Research Excellence framework.

Yours sincerely,

Judith Mudd, Chief Executive  
On behalf of the British Sociological Association

Professor John Solomos, Chair  
On behalf of the Heads and Professors of Sociology

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## Lord Stern's review of The Research Excellence Framework

### Response from the British Sociological Association and The Heads and Professors of Sociology

**Q1. *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?***

Peer review of outputs must remain as the central principle of the REF, and as central to its legitimacy. HEFCE and ESRC reviews have shown that existing bibliometric measures provide very poor estimates of research quality. Sociological studies of scientific citations have demonstrated that such measures correlate with the social structure of a discipline: with the place of postgraduate study, with research supervision, with sources of research funding, and so on. No studies have found scientific citations to evidence quality.

Measures of past performance are not good indicators of current research quality so extending the REF period would produce a less accurate picture on which to base future funding. There **is** scope for the use of metrics in relation to impact and research environment, but **as a means of informing and not of determining judgements**. This is the view of the Wilsdon Review and one that we support. The assessment of impact, in particular, relied on overall assessments of case studies and was unable to reflect on areas of strength and weakness within case studies. The use of metrics, in relation to Environment and Impact, could give the possibility of more granular and discriminating assessments rather than a simple overall grade.

There are also serious risks of 'gaming' the different components of the REF – for example, where case studies do not have an 'organic relation' to the UoA in question but have been brought in from different parts of a University, thereby, being poor proxies for impact culture in the area to which they have been attached.



**Q2. If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organizing 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?**

While REF may officially be a tool for resource allocation it is also widely used in unofficial league tables that have a huge effect on the reputation and so the resourcing of departments/discipline areas, including, for example, the ability to attract high quality staff and students and determination of eligibility for doctoral training awards by Research Councils. Such use cannot be ignored. League tables generally operate at subject level and more aggregate, or institutional, reporting and assessment would be unofficially (and inappropriately) disaggregated by the publishers of league tables.

Assessing at UoA level informs institutional decision-making and ensures that internal allocations either reflect internal quality variations or are consequences of institutional strategies of expansion, contraction, or cross-subsidy. Without this granular assessment, such processes would not be transparent and would lack legitimacy.

While aspects of environment may usefully report wider - school, faculty and institutional level - processes and strategies, interest in the REF concerns the ways in which these have been utilized at subject level. These usages may vary quite considerably within an institution or Faculty. However, given that there is considerable convergence on common research strategies across universities, it is not clear that this part of the REF retains its usefulness, or proportionate role in the distribution of QR funds.

With regard to Impact it is surely important to understand the relationship between the specific context of the research which has produced the impact and to attach the assessment to the relevant UoA.

**Q3. What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision-making and strategic planning in your organization? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?**

This is likely to vary from one institution to another. The most likely response has been for HEIs to use a poor REF outcome to legitimize decisions made on other grounds rather than actually driving decision making, for example to reinforce internal decisions to close or radically restructure a department.

We are concerned that where HEIs have aggregated disciplines in order to submit a larger group of staff to one UoA the result is then used as a rationale for developing the area of the UoA to the



detriment of the constituent parts – i.e. what was a strategic decision for REF purposes turns into an unintended organizational rationale. This is a further reason for not aggregating UoAs.

***Q4. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?***

Sufficient data are collected currently. Further data collection would be an even greater burden on institutions and researchers and so would reduce productivity. It isn't clear that productivity and research excellence are directly correlated. The REF drives research toward the criteria evaluated by the REF, but there is no independent warrant that it constitutes high quality research. The time-cycle of the REF encourages a time-cycle for research which is potentially encouraging research on more 'do-able' and 'predictable' topics, potentially to the neglect of more 'blue-skies' and 'speculative' research, or research that requires long immersion.

***Q5. How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivize constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?***

This is not the job of a system aimed at the measurement of research quality. If government wishes to incentivize such behaviour it should look to other levers. In any case, the emphasis on interdisciplinarity favours one particular model, which, in itself tends to reinforce disciplinarity.

What tends to be favoured, by Government etc., is short applied interdisciplinarity directed at specific practical problems and embedded within specific user requirements. This relies on the mobilization of the standard capacities of disciplines and does nothing to reconstruct their concepts or methodologies.

We are concerned about narrow understandings of interdisciplinarity which focus on context-driven, short-term, problem focused research at the expense of investigator-initiated, discipline-based knowledge and consider that it is crucial to the health of UK research that there is a mix of both these approaches to research.

***Q6. 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?***



The REF has influenced the pattern of publication in some disciplines. There is a perception that panels have a preference for journal publication – particularly over book chapters. There is also a strong perception that panels work with journal rankings in disciplines where this is not the case. This is particularly damaging for collaborative international research, where an edited book reporting the different cases together is the optimum form of publication.

We would like to see researchers able to spend more time analyzing data and refining of publications and also on producing more monograph length outputs (if these are appropriate to the discipline) rather than being under constant pressure to publish quickly and move on to capture the next grant. This approach would improve quality and increase connectivity across research projects.

The REF appears to have exacerbated the tendency for researchers to focus narrowly in their specialist area rather than being 'distracted' by wider intellectual debate even though broader debate might produce better ideas. It may also have reduced 'risk taking' based on the view that 'playing safe' may be the best way to get into the top rated journals.

The issue of 'gaming' is somewhat different. While the REF 2014 procedures reduced gaming it still occurred. There was a wide recognition that the differential treatment of outputs and impact when staff move institutions was anomalous.

There are strong arguments for a requirement to include all HESES coded staff in the REF submissions. However, HESES codes do not map easily onto operational subject units, even after recent changes. Many sociologists, for example, may work in Medical Schools, Business Schools, etc., as well as in sociology departments. They may be submitted to various UoAs, depending on institutional strategies, interdisciplinary and collaborative research practices, and professional preferences. It is therefore important to understand that it would not be possible to work out overall subject-level indicators with any precision. However, there is a case for arguing for the submission of all R and TR staff across each UoA and this would move away from the artificiality of some submissions based on low inclusion. In research intensive HEIs there should be no good reason not to be inclusive, but this practice would be to the detriment of 'pockets of excellence' in less research intensive HEIs. If there were to be a move to 100% submissions then it seems likely that the sampling of outputs would need to occur so as to avoid an even more unwieldy and expensive process. If sampling were used then it would be very important that this was done in a statistically appropriate way and designed to produce a representative sample compliant with equality and diversity considerations. Or alternatively only the best two outputs were required rather than four.



***Q7. 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?***

We would ask the question 'Who is to decide what is a 'positive' influence?' and we do not consider that it is the job of government to determine the development of academic disciplines. We perceive an increasing bureaucratization of research, where University research committees and managers set priorities, which are similar to external priorities for research in the context of competition for ranking and funding. This has 'conservative' consequences with the University peer-review process likely to constrain research towards previously identified research priorities also constraining innovative research. In a context where the impact agenda seeks to shorten time from 'idea to use' a possible consequence is to displace research that is genuinely innovative.

We are concerned about the pressures for short-term gains and short-term impact to the detriment of longer gestation and more exploratory research.

The proposed TEF would have a great (negative) impact on research quality, in that it would increase the workload of academics in responding to more regulation and encourage a climate of mistrust neither of which are conducive to sustaining a creative research environment.

***Q8. How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilize QR funding obtained through the exercise?***

It is crucial that Universities do retain their autonomy in relation to control over QR. While it is clear that cross-subsidy does occur this should be transparent within a given HEI and with a clear academic rationale. However, it is important that, in the main, QR is available, for the support of future research, as close to the context in which it was generated as possible. The serious risk is that current government policies and audit measures across a range of activities have led universities to focus on revenue generation and growth to the neglect of the core functions of universities in knowledge production and dissemination for diverse public benefits

***Q9. Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?***

There are strong arguments for including academic impact alongside policy impact as an essential criterion. The move to research-informed teaching and the proposed TEF both support this need to recognize the way in which research impacts on student experience, student employability, the advancement of a subject or specialism, and the development of other disciplines through the 'export' of knowledge and ideas.

In particular, we are concerned about the way in which TRAC methodology has constructed an artificial set of categories for estimating the time assigned to different activities. In a context



where costs arising from research activities could be 'charged out' through FEC, teaching activities were reduced in significance. For example, the research-basis of teaching – scholarship - was not allocated to teaching within TRAC. This has meant that workloads currently do not recognize in full the activities necessary to deliver good teaching. The overstatement of research activities in TRAC was recognized in the Wakeham Report, but not the consequence that this was understating the time assigned to teaching and, thus, creating the suspicion that teaching was subsidizing research that drives the idea that a TEF is necessary to re-direct university priorities.

We would comment further on the overall influence of the REF on research and researchers (Q6) because, we are also concerned that universities are adopting increasingly similar research strategies, driven by centralized funding processes such as RCUK and the REF. These are undercutting the plurality of research in the UK. For example, most universities seem to target grant capture from RCUK and, in the course of this, to adopt as strategic priorities those of RCUK. QR is funded along similar tracks as RCUK funding. There is a reduction in true 'responsive mode' research, where research is driven from academic interest outside pre-defined 'priorities'. In addition, the adoption of the 'impact agenda' on the part of the REF means that funders who are interested in funding responsive mode research and who have not made impact a priority are finding that researchers are pushed toward those constraints by how the evaluation of outputs and wider research environments will be assessed.

The broad pattern of subject-based subpanels and wider main panels must be retained as an effective and efficient working practice. While there may be a need for some tweaking of subpanel boundaries and composition, the basic pattern of 2014 worked extremely well. We are concerned about what how the next REF process will be managed. There is a great deal of expertise in HEFCE about the nuances of this very complex process and it is crucial that this is not lost. We would hope that whatever the future plans are that HEFCE would be retained at least through the development process for REF 2021.