

RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

UCET response to Funding Councils' consultation paper

Question 1

Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF?

1.1 UCET agrees with many of the central features of the REF. We endorse the aims of research assessment; the commitment to strengthen research quality which underpins the whole undertaking; the definition of research as a *process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared*; the criteria of originality, rigour and significance to denote excellence of research outputs; the incorporation of *impact* as a component of the assessment framework; the continued emphasis on the quality of the research environment in that framework; the adjudication of quality by expert panels, including those with the authority to evaluate the impact of research; the characterisation of research quality in a *single overall excellence profile*; the reduction in the number of main panels; and the measures to secure greater consistency of judgement and approach across all UOAs.

1.2 That said, UCET maintains that the proposals as they stand contain serious shortcomings. The central difficulty relates to the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the way in which the central components of the framework are presented. For example, there is a clear overlap between the *significance* criterion for assessing outputs, and the definition of *impact*. It is appropriate to differentiate between, on the one hand, the internal or academic sense of significance, relating to the way in which, for example, research leads to important re-conceptualisations in the field, or offers novel modes of analysis or investigation, and on the other, the external or non-academic sense of the term, relating to the way in which research affects policy or contributes to the enhancement of professional practice. It seems clear from paragraph 27a that impact is intended to assess the second of these: it represents *an assessment of demonstrable and social impacts*. Unfortunately, at paragraph 39 *significance* is defined as the capacity to *make a difference either through intellectual influence in the academic sphere, or through actual or potential use beyond the academic sphere, or both*. There is a need to restrict *significance* to impact on the field of enquiry and to seek to capture the social or other benefits accruing from research through the assessment of *impact*.

1.3 A second confusion occurs in the delineation of impact and environment. At paragraph 63 it is proposed that one of the indicators of impact is *the amount and extent of collaboration with the full range of research users*. That clearly overlaps with the definition of *engagement*, the third of the ingredients which will assess the quality of the research environment.

1.4 Thirdly, there is ambiguity about the relationship between the assessed quality of outputs and impact. Repeatedly, for example at paragraphs 27a, 55b, and 66, there is a clear implication that the quality of impact is closely associated with outputs judged to be excellent. Clearly, if outputs and impact are separate categories in the assessment framework it is logically possible for even mediocre research to have a high impact. If it is the intention that high impact ratings will be restricted to outputs above a given threshold of quality – a perfectly sustainable proposition – then that should be made explicit in the documentation.

1.5 The key point here is that if there are to be three elements in the assessment framework and if wholly predictable confusions and double counting are to be avoided, then these elements should be logically separate and clearly differentiated, each of them pulling its weight, as it were, and contributing distinctively to the overall assessment, shorn of their present inconsistencies, ambiguities and overlapping features.

Question 2

What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing outputs?

2.1 UCET agrees that institutions themselves should determine which staff and which outputs should feature in their submissions. However, there is a need for greater clarity with regard to eligibility. Is eligibility restricted to staff with *substantive research roles* or to anyone with a substantive contract that includes research or teaching, or both? Does this criterion of eligibility include those who are research assistants or research fellows? There is also a need, in the light, for example, of research commissioned by HEFCE itself, to encourage the inclusion of women and black and ethnic minority staff, as well as those holding part-time contracts. We also urge that institutions are incentivised to include “early career” researchers, recognising that in the field of Education staff may embark on research careers after a significant period in other forms of professional activity. In that connection we trust that the introduction of the impact component in the assessment will not penalize submissions which have a significant number of early career researchers.

2.2 UCET welcomes confirmation that all types of high-quality research outputs will be assessed, including *applied and translational research*.

2.3 We re-affirm our view that citation-based approaches are inappropriate in fields such as Education and trust that the guidance to main panels will protect that stance.

2.4 We support the reduction of expected outputs from 4 to 3, for several reasons: it will reduce pressure on panel members; it represents a switch of emphasis from the volume of research to the quality of research; and it recognises that, by the time all the complexities of assessing impact are resolved in a way that permits the timely emergence of appropriate institutions strategies, the period between issuing the definitive guidance to institutions and the submission date will be unreasonably short.

2.5 We agree that there should be double weighting for certain outputs, on the clear understanding that all the relevant criteria are made explicit in advance, so that institutions can have confidence in the way such outputs will be handled by panels. Naturally, an institution should be entitled *not* to give double weighting to an output if it so wishes.

2.6 There is also a need for clarity about the editing of research collections, such as material from ESRC seminar series. HEFCE itself has recognised that such outputs make an important contribution to *the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines*. In RAE 2008, the Education Sup-panel rejected such work as a research activity. That stance needs to be reviewed.

Question 3

What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing impact?

3.1 We accept that, given the massive public investment in research, it is reasonable for higher education to be expected to justify how that investment has been utilised, and to demonstrate what social and other benefits accrue from this level of funding from the public purse. We therefore agree that the REF should include an assessment of the impact of research. However, it is a matter for concern that, this far into the period of preparation for the introduction of the REF in 2013, proposals for the assessment of impact are so underworked and under-theorised.

3.2 Notwithstanding the disclaimer at paragraph 53b, we are concerned that the funding councils responsible for the REF, given the government pressures to which they are prone, will privilege impacts that are economic, or will appear to represent perhaps questionable quick-fixes to government policy initiatives. It cannot be too strenuously insisted that impact in the educational sphere is not always clearly identifiable, linear and direct, but, on the contrary, is gradual and diffuse. The interface between research and educational practice or policy-making is extremely complex: there are numerous intervening variables – resource constraints, the clash of priorities, leadership and innovation strategies, ideological differences, the political context, to name but a few – which can exert a powerful effect on the success or otherwise of any attempt to modify practice or policy in the light of research findings, not least in the field of Education, where policy decisions are strongly influenced by political and other values. How, indeed are we to attribute the reason for the educational change that has been demonstrated, in the face of a multitude of possible explanatory factors? That question is particularly apposite in regard to the impact of research in education on policy. Research that genuinely challenges current orthodoxies, and poses fundamental

questions about the conduct of education, may initiate a period of public debate that takes many years to issue in changes of educational policy or practice. That is, to invoke the terms of an ESRC paper, the REF assessment of impact should be concerned with “intermediate goods” as well as with “final goods”.

3.3 We agree with some of the proposals to address time-lag and attribution, by permitting a 10-15 year retrospective analysis, and by seeking to isolate the *contribution* made by research to an impact. While commending the mounting of a pilot exercise that seeks to offer practical solutions to the difficulties of assessing impact but remain sceptical about its outcome. We agree that institutions should be expected to produce an impact statement, to be illuminated by case studies, to demonstrate the reach and transformational effect of their research. In our view, the statement and case studies should seek to establish a degree of congruence with a limited number of powerful indicators of impact. The list given in Annex 5 is unworkably diffuse. What is required is a limited number, perhaps 5 or 6, which institutions would be expected to use in their self-evaluation of the impact of their research. In our view, one of the key indicators would be a statement of the institution’s strategy for tracking, forward from the research to changes of policy and practice, or backward from the new policy or practice to its research antecedents. It would be especially vital for institutions to be able to adduce appropriate evidence in relation to time-lag, attribution and corroboration. It should be a particular responsibility of the panel to interrogate the robustness of the evidential base an institution adduces in defence of its impact claims. Our view therefore is that the guidance that is issued in relation to impact should be illustrative and indicative rather than comprehensive and stipulative: everything will turn on the quality of the evidence an institution can invoke to demonstrate the extensiveness and power of the impact of its research.

3.4 We are concerned that the interpretation of impact may adversely affect institutions that are in process of building up their research profile and which demonstrate a promising trajectory of research development. Such institutions, particularly if they report a significant number of “early researchers”, should not be penalised if their impact is restricted to a particular field to which they have decided to give research priority. In that connection we consider that one of the ways of demonstrating impact is through the development of professional doctorate programmes, which strengthen the intellectual capital of the education service.

3.5 We are concerned about the way in which the assessment of impact will be reported. Is there anything more than administrative convenience in seeking to use the same number of categories to report assessments of outputs and impact? That strategy suggests a degree of confidence in the categories used to report on the assessment of outputs, which may not be justified, given the decision to modify what these categories mean, at the upper levels. With regard to the proposed categories to report the assessment of impact, is there not a degree of hair-splitting in claiming to differentiate consistently between *ground-breaking* to denote *Exceptional* performance and *highly innovative* to denote what is merely *Excellent*?

3.6 Impact should not be geographically confined to the UK; nor should the impact on marginal groups be ignored. Panels should be obliged to assess the fullest range of impacts.

3.7 It is clear that the corroboration of claims relating to impact will require significant externality of scrutiny, to the extent that panels and sub-panels will require to be advised by those who are in a position to evaluate the impact of research. It will be vital of course that such panel or associate members are properly and fully inducted into their duties. While agreeing that panels should be reinforced in this way, we hope we have already made plain that the crucial judgements here relate to the quality of the evidence an institution can invoke to demonstrate the power of the impact of its research. When it comes to the capacity to analyse and evaluate the quality of evidence to justify claims, so-called users cannot be considered to have a monopoly of wisdom. By all means let us involve those whose professional life requires them to take account of educational and other kinds of research, but let us not absolve academic members of panels from the responsibility to make the kind of judgements which they, having been selected to membership of a panel, should be eminently qualified to make.

Question 4

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

4.1 As has been maintained in response to Question 1 above, there is a need to remove the ambiguity between *engagement* and the assessment of impact.

4.2 It would be helpful to institutions if it could be clarified whether or not *esteem*, which featured in RAE 2008, is subsumed within the research environment component of the framework.

4.3 There might also be further clarification about what precisely is intended by the term *critical mass*.

4.4 We are concerned that institutions, particularly those with a major commitment to teacher education, may not receive the credit they deserve for the investment they have made in seeking to strengthen the research environment, in response to problems identified by the ESRC and others.

Question 5

Do you agree with our proposals for combining and weighting the output, impact and environment sub-profiles?

We agree that the three sub-profiles should be combined into a single overall profile for each submitted unit, but we have reservations about the relative weightings. In our view the proposed weighting of 25% for impact is too high, given the uncertainties surrounding the assessment of that component. We also consider that the proposed weighting of 15% for the research environment does not incentivise institutions to invest sufficiently in such areas as staff development and training of PGR students, and the nurturing of early researchers, which are key features of the research environment. We therefore propose a weighting of 70 % for outputs; 15% for impact; and 15% for environment.

Question 6

What comments do you have on the panel configuration proposed at Annex E?

We appreciate the need to have fewer panels and consider the proposals at Annex E to be appropriate. We also welcome the location of Education within the new structure.

Question 7

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

Yes. Securing consistency of judgement and practice is vital to the credibility and fairness of the whole exercise and we believe that the proposals now made to secure these outcomes are to be commended. It is particularly important that panels make adequate provision for the moderation of the work of sub-panels.

Question 8

Do you have any suggested additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies?

The proposals for Education are wide-ranging and appropriate. We suggest that the list should be supplemented by the Association of Directors of Children's Services, the Association of School and College Leaders, and other relevant teacher and headteacher professional associations. In addition, we are most anxious that the membership of the Education sub-panel is representative of institutions across the sector.

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?

Yes. It is encouraging that panels will be expected to have explicit arrangements for assessing interdisciplinary work. It is worth noting, however, that interdisciplinarity does not simply refer to outputs: if the REF is to take inter-professional collaboration and multi-agency working seriously then it should ensure that the assessment of interdisciplinary research relates to all three of the components of the framework. It is vital, in a field such as Education, that full and proper account is taken of the various forms of academic and professional interchange now widespread. Finally, there would be merit in ensuring that those with credible records in interdisciplinary research are included on panels and sub-panels.

Question 10

Do you agree with our proposals for encouraging and supporting researcher mobility?

Yes. We believe that the proposals set out at paragraph 110 are sound. The inclusion of impact as a component of the framework should serve to encourage institutions in this respect. We also suggest that there is a need to broaden the model of researcher mobility to include those who undertake research-led consultancy in different settings.

Question 11

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

The key here lies in institutional policies and practices. The proposals at paragraphs 111 and 112, particularly those relating to the treatment of individual staff circumstances, provide the right kind of support for institutions, and exert the right kind of pressure.

Question 12

Do you have any comments on the proposed timetable?

The timetable is extremely tight. Already we are approaching the half-way mark between assessments and key features of the arrangements are not yet finalised. Is there not a case for deferring the assessment for a year? What is to be gained by pressing ahead with a scheme that is under-developed and is in places little more than a pilot for future assessments?

Question 13

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

In our view the inclusion of impact will certainly increase the burden on institutions. There are three ways of reducing the overall burden: by further clarification of what is proposed, thus saving much institutional time trying to second-guess what is expected; by reducing the number of outputs from 4 to 3; and by delaying the process till 2014.

Question 14

Do you have any further comments on the proposals?

We wish to echo comments we have made in response to successive consultation exercises about the special position of teacher education institutions. We support the principle of research selectivity for it is vital that universities in the UK should be able to hold their own in the international community of scholarship. However, there is a widespread consensus that engagement in teacher education, with all the changing government pressures that that engagement now implies, seriously affects the capacity of such institutions to make the kind of investment in research that is expected of those who achieve the highest ratings. If it is acknowledged that strong teacher education programmes flourish best in a research environment, if we endorse the principle of teaching as a researching profession, if we support the government's aspiration to see teaching as a master's level profession, through the Master's in Teaching and Learning and in other ways, with the clear implication that those who teach that programme should be research-active, then account needs to be taken in the funding of research of how these institutions are to be properly supported.