

Research England REF Team
info@ref.ac.uk

4 October 2023

Dear Sir / Madam,

Research Excellence Framework 2028

On behalf of the Academy of Social Sciences, I write to respond to the [current consultation](#) on the Research Excellence Framework 2028.

The Academy of Social Sciences exists to promote social sciences in the UK for public benefit. We showcase, champion and advocate for the social sciences, raising awareness of their immense value and helping to secure their flourishing future. The social science disciplines include: anthropology, architecture & planning, business & management, criminology, development studies, economics, education, human geography & environmental studies, law, politics & international studies, psychology & behavioural sciences, regional studies, sociology, social work and social policy.

Our key comments on the proposals are set out below.

Over-arching observations

- *Potential to widen structural divides between institutions:* While these changes are likely to deliver a range of benefits, there is a danger that they might reinforce existing structural inequalities within the higher education sector. The majority of research funding is dispersed to a minority of institutions, with severe regional imbalances in distribution. As such, even with the new definition of 'research excellence', the 'new REF' is likely to disproportionately benefit existing research-intensive universities. There is a real possibility that the increased focus on 'research culture' reinstates the pre/post-92 divide in HE. This would be particularly deleterious for the social sciences, given the distribution of them across the pre/post-92 divide.
- *QR funding:* There is a need to clarify the future link between REF2028 and QR funding. For the social sciences, it is important to understand how the assessment process will link to the distribution of QR funding. The Nurse Review raised concerns about the transparency, efficiency and viability of the current dual-support system, with the report stating: "*Government, working with UKRI and the UK higher education funding bodies should review and when necessary reform competitive and response-mode grant funding, QR (and Devolved Administration equivalents), and fEC, and replace them with improved mechanisms*". The Academy of Social Sciences would argue strongly that QR or a close equivalent should remain in place and be strengthened, as this type of hypothecated research funding is essential to all social science disciplines, inclusive across a wide

range of institutions, and vital to early carer scholars, and that this should be reflected in any review.

- *Funding more broadly:* Whilst we are conscious that funding matters fall outside the scope of this consultation, we note that following REF2021, Panel C (social sciences) fared much worse than other Panels in terms of funding per FTE, and that this was a direct consequence of how allocations were made¹. Panel C saw a huge increase in research volume within REF2021, but this has not been followed by funding. Any future changes to the REF system need to put in place commitments (ahead of submissions) whereby future funding to different Panels will follow research volume.

Specific points raised by member Learned Societies

The Academy also endorses several specific points made by our Learned Society members in their individual, discipline-based responses, including the following:

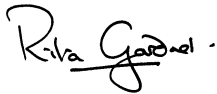
- *Potential adverse impact on EDI of changes:* We welcome the principle of seeking to improve inclusivity by removing the maximum number of outputs contributed by an individual and to move further away from the assessment of individuals towards assessing research as a shared and collectively generated good. However, there are EDI concerns about how this will affect the diverse communities working in social science research. Other aspects of the REF submission, such as the code of practice and EDI monitoring, are essential for a fair and inclusive research assessment. This is especially important given the decoupling of individuals and outputs. If an institution decides only to submit particular people or particular research areas in their submission, there will be no assessment of the equalities issues within such a decision.
- *Minimum / maximum submission thresholds:* Notwithstanding the points above, we have some concerns about the removal of maximum / minimum submission thresholds for individual staff. The thresholds provided a reasonable way of ensuring more equitable division of resource and support across colleagues, to the long-term benefit of research culture. Taking away the minimum threshold would negatively affect those entering the job market, staff with significant exposure to teaching demands, and those returning from extended periods of absence. The minimum threshold provided a useful mechanism to ensure long-term support for relevant staff in maintaining their research activity. Similarly, uncapping the top end comes with the risk of imposing unfair and inequitable pressures on a small number of staff to maximise outputs, compromising their ability to contribute to the rest of the life and work of their submitting unit. Such a situation would also make it less likely that such staff would engage in long-form outputs (eg, books) that might hinder the wider intellectual development of a discipline or field.
- *Potential impact of 'gaming' the new system:* There will be greater management of research activity at institutional level with institutions determining which outputs get submitted according to what they think best represents the discipline. While there are always issues with any such process, this proposed version is seeking to put more power at the management level and take it away from academics. This is likely to have greater consequences in terms of the greater centralisation of management at institutional level. There is a danger that managers will 'play safe' in terms of what they submit and would be possibly less likely to submit work seen to be at the margins of the discipline or developing new directions.
- *People, Culture & Environment:* Whilst we appreciate the ongoing attempts to balance different aspects of research through the weighting of the three elements, there are concerns about how People, Culture & Environment can be evaluated fairly and objectively, given the difficulty of assessing constructs such as 'culture' through a narrative. These concerns relate to the robustness of any such assessment and their potential implications for EDI, and to both the institutional and disciplinary-level

statement. We also note the inherent conceptual problems of 'research culture' and its limitations².

- *Interdisciplinary work*: We welcome the further development of the process by which interdisciplinary work might be recognised and rewarded (while appreciating the progress made in the last round of assessment). This is likely to be especially valuable for units of assessment and colleagues seeking to address 'grand challenges' in partnership with other disciplines where the norms of publishing are considerably different. It would be helpful for a greater sense of what kinds of understanding of interdisciplinarity are emerging in different sub-panels and for processes to evaluate outputs to be scoped fairly.
- *Non-personal submissions*: Some concern has been expressed about the return to non-personal submission levels, since it risks going back to the 'star' system where a few people are prioritised for research rather than a more equal distribution of research opportunities. This possibility for heavy reliance on a small number of researchers whose output is prolific leads to a potential unintended consequence of concentrating resources in a way that is detrimental to nurturing a consistent and equitable research culture.
- *PhD submissions*: Some colleagues are concerned about the potential repercussions on PhD recruitment of the PhD submission point. Related to this are concerns about PhD students' contractual relationship, unnecessary pressure on PGRs, unintended implications for EDI. We would like further consideration of the implications of this proposal.

Should you have any queries about the above points, please do not hesitate to contact the Academy's Head of Policy & Public Affairs, Ed Bridges (e.bridges@acss.org.uk).

Yours faithfully



Dr Rita Gardner CBE FAcSS

Chief Executive
Academy of Social Sciences
R.Gardner@acss.org.uk

¹ Full figures available within Hunt, T., Low, H. & Smith, S. (2022) "[Understanding REF funding allocations in 2022](#)", University of Oxford, Department of Economics Discussion Paper Series.

² Callard, F. (2023) "[Towards a critical-conceptual analysis of 'research culture'](#)", *Area*, 00, 1–9.