

Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework

Page 1: Respondent details

Q1. Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of

Representative body

Please provide the name of your organisation

Council for Higher Education in Art & Design (CHEAD). CHEAD is the representative body for the art, design, creative media, and related disciplines in higher education. CHEAD provides a voice for and on behalf of higher education art and design in the UK four nations advancing knowledge and understanding in the sector and promoting the sector's interests to others.

Page 2: Overall approach

Q2. 1. Do you have any comments on the proposal to maintain an overall continuity of approach with REF 2014, as outlined in paragraphs 10 and 23?

There is strong support among our member HEIs for maximum continuity with REF 2014 and retention of key emphases on the prioritisation of excellence wherever it is found over an institutional 'audit' approach and of peer review as the primary evaluation strategy.

Many of our member HEIs have invested significant resource in areas related to REF 2014 and we are already nearly mid-way through the assessment period. Overall, our members feel that the fewer changes made to the REF 2014 framework the better and note that the 2018 guidance publication date would leave little time to assimilate changes. At the least, our member HEIs would appreciate an incremental approach and as much notice as possible concerning any rule changes for 2021.

Page 3: Unit of assessment structure

Q3. 2. What comments do you have about the unit of assessment structure in REF 2021?

Whilst there are clearly some issues relating to the UoA structure in 2014, which our members' individual responses may refer to, it is, again, generally felt that significant change would place excessive burden on HEIs and hinder strategic comparison and development across REF assessment periods. Our membership would welcome the REF 2014 UoA structure being maintained in REF 2021.

Page 4: Expert panels

Q4. 3a. Do you agree that the submissions guidance and panel criteria should be developed simultaneously?

Yes

Comments:

Lack of coherence between these two sets of documents has caused unnecessary burden.

Q5. 3b. Do you support the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year?

No

Comments:

It is crucial that sub-panel members are in place as early as possible to ensure that they are fully briefed on criteria including treatment on practice as research (PAR). Sub-panel members should reflect the breadth of sub-disciplines and methodologies including PAR for Panel D, UoA 34.

Q6. 4. Do you agree with the proposed measures outlined at paragraph 35 for improving representativeness on the panels?

Yes

Comments:

Our members unanimously agree with the importance of improving the representativeness of the panels.

Q7. 5a. Based on the options described at paragraphs 36 to 38 what approach do you think should be taken to nominating panel members?

Relying on professional bodies and subject communities for nominations tends to 'pre-filter' candidates with a potential for reinforcing existing exclusions and subject area orthodoxies. We favour an open nomination process as more likely to capture a larger, more diverse, and potentially more representative candidate pool. Our membership strongly supports an open call as well as direct nominations by HEIs and other sector bodies with an interest in research to panels and sub-panels. This may add some administrative burden, but we believe the potential advantages would outweigh any cost implications.

Q8. 5b. Do you agree with the proposal to require nominating bodies to provide equality and diversity information?

Yes

Comments:

Yes. In addition, this data should be linked to a coherent strategy to diversify panel membership within a set period.

Q9. 6. Please comment on any additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies, provided alongside the consultation document.

It is felt that greater diversity will only be achieved by extending nominating bodies to include HEIs as well as other sector bodies in order to avoid a self-replicating selection through a relatively limited network. It is therefore worthwhile even though it may add to the administrative burden.

Page 5: Staff

Q10. 7. Do you have any comments on the proposal to use HESA cost centres to map research-active staff to UOAs and are there any alternative approaches that should be considered?

This is an area of some concern across our membership. HESA cost centres, whilst a convenient source of existing data, were not designed to classify research areas and have never been tried as such. There is an existing research landscape with established, yet fluid, research groupings, which will not map over cost centres. There are concerns that interdisciplinary research, in particular, is likely to be penalised along with research cultures within art, design and creative media SSIs. There is concern that an overly rigid classification such as HESA cost centres will lead to equally rigid 'silos' in fundamental contradiction to Stern's recommendations. Additional administrative burden will be placed on HEIs to integrate the work of HESA with REF teams. The census date for the application of the HESA cost centres to the mapping of research staff is of equal concern as a retrospective application may not enable HEIs to prepare proactively and adequately.

There is strong support for HEIs continuing to allocate their staff into UoAs and alternative approaches to controlling 'gaming' could be developed. For example, HEIs could include which UoAs they intend to submit to in their 'intentions to submit' and the justification for their staff mapping in dialogue with HEFCE and reaching agreement before the census date.

Q11. 8. What comments do you have on the proposed definition of 'research-active' staff described in paragraph 43?

Again, there is significant concern relating to these proposals from across the board. The definition of 'research-active' is, in itself, acceptable, although HESA coding does not reflect the subtleties of contemporary career pathways. When seen in context with other proposals in this document there is an unacceptable risk that HEI's will try to 'game' this system by adapting internal structures and staff contracts, which would not only misrepresent the fluidity of academic careers but could further widen a gap between teaching and research already of concern in the regulatory frameworks established by the HE Bill, REF and TEF. This is likely to be damaging both to individual career paths and to the overall health of both research and pedagogic cultures. Furthermore, many HEIs would expect a very significant multiplication of outputs submitted which may not reflect high levels of research activity and could lead to an overall reduction of the UK's GPA and damage the UK research sector as a whole.

In particular, taking into account 'a measure of independence' will be crucial to exempt RAs whose jobs do not include the development of independent research and its dissemination. For instance, in Design, RAs are often practitioners who do not identify as academic researchers, despite contributing as such. In addition, RAs may be hired to projects that do not produce outputs until after their employment has concluded. Too broad a net in requiring submissions from RAs may demotivate institutions from hiring practitioners in this way. In any case, it is unclear from this formulation how 'a measure of independence' will be operationalised and whether this will solve the problem.

We would refer to proposals, based on discussions held at the University Alliance REF consultation workshop, either for HEIs to continue to classify their own staff's level of research activity or for more granularity to HESA coding to recognise more fully the range of research-related activities undertaken by staff but restricting the number of staff submitted to those coded specifically as REF research active. Initial investment for HEIs and HESA would be more than paid off in avoiding a 'flooding' of the REF system and make a universal submission approach workable.

Q12. 9a. The proposal to require an average of two outputs per full-time equivalent staff returned?

There is general support for decoupling staff and outputs. The more detailed answer to this question, however, relates to the definition of 'research active' in Q8 and how widely this will be interpreted. There are also a number of issues for our member HEIs relating to types of institution and research disciplines. If the definition of 'research active' becomes more granular or HEIs allocate their own staff to UoAs as suggested above, then an average of two outputs per FTE with a minimum of one and maximum of 6 would seem reasonable.

Q13. 9b. The maximum number of outputs for each staff member?

There is some agreement that 6 is acceptable. However, there are also concerns that setting the maximum number at 6 may result in burdensome pressure on researchers regarded by their institutions as exceptionally productive if other members of a UoA were less productive. A maximum of 4 coupled with a zero minimum would address this.

Q14. 9c. Setting a minimum requirement of one for each staff member?

There is a general feeling that setting the minimum requirement at zero would better reflect the evaluation of excellence wherever it is found whilst a minimum of one would tend towards 'audit'.

There is, however, some concern that HEIs submitting a number of FTEs with zero outputs may detract from the presentation of the overall research environment and calculation of research intensity, which would be a distortion if a number of staff had actually been successfully active in terms of engagement and impact rather than production of outputs. We would suggest that there should be flexibility on this question with an option to submit a justification for zero outputs if the minimum were set generally to one.

Furthermore, PAR outputs or monographs have a longer 'lead-in' than journal outputs and research-active FTEs may not be ready to submit research in progress. This, in turn, would disadvantage creative SSIs with strong PAR activity and possibly negatively impact quality of research as research-active staff rush outputs. ECRs may also be research-active but not yet ready to submit. A minimum requirement of one may place undue pressure on practitioners and ECRs, therefore. There could also be issues related to co-authoring of outputs and interdisciplinary work.

If outputs are to be non-portable it would be necessary to permit zero outputs to be submitted in the case of staff who move institution towards the end of the REF period or who have been ill, on maternity leave, or seconded for a significant period etc.

Granularity in HESA coding of research-active staff with a zero minimum output requirement may be the best approach in order to avoid new forms of gaming, increasing discrimination, and pressure on quality, as well as issues relating to pressures on highly productive staff.

Q15. 10a. Is acceptance for publication a suitable marker to identify outputs that an institution can submit and how would this apply across different output types?

No. This is generally felt to be problematic not only for journal submissions but more particularly for PAR outputs. For much research, the bulk of work takes place prior to writing and publication and this could lead to the 'banking' of unpublished research prior to any planned move to a new institution. Non-portability also assumes single publications from projects and could lead to unnecessary duplicate publications.

It is generally felt that non-portability is likely to create far more problems than it solves and the issue of investment in research staff development approached in alternative ways. For example, investment in research talent could be recognised and rewarded via the environment assessment.

Q16. 10b. What challenges would your institution face in verifying the eligibility of outputs?

This is best answered in detail by individual HEIs but, again, PAR presents particular difficulties in verifying eligibility of outputs relevant across the art, design and creative media sector.

Acceptance date would, in theory, be the most appropriate marker for journal articles. However, under the current HEFCE Open Access Policy requirements, it is not necessary to capture acceptance date and so would be extremely challenging, if not impossible, to use this criteria for the REF 2021 retrospectively. Every acceptance date would need to be cross-referenced with HR data to ensure an institution could 'claim' an output. This task would be extremely burdensome and further increase administrative requirements for outputs, in addition to the newly-introduced open access requirements; furthermore, acceptance still relies largely on academic self-certification, which increases the margin of error.

Publication date would be easier to manage, but it would be a less accurate marker of 'institutional ownership' due to the length of time that can elapse between acceptance and publication, during which time authors may have moved on and the sector may have to accept these margins of error.

Neither approach would be appropriate for monographs or practice-based portfolios, which are developed over many years. For staff that have moved institutions during the production of such outputs our members have proposed that outputs are shared equally between institutions where the research was undertaken and eventually published.

Q17. 10c. Would non-portability have a negative impact on certain groups and how might this be mitigated?

Although our members generally support the intentions behind non-portability in protecting investment in developing research staff and encouraging recruitment on the basis of talent, non-portability could have a significant negative impact on mobility across the sector. Whilst a proportion of our membership has actually been negatively affected by portability to some extent there is still almost no support, in practice, for non-portability.

Researchers moving between institutions in the two years before REF would be particularly affected and researchers at all levels risk becoming locked to institutions other than in a window of perhaps two years after each REF unless they 'game' the new system by 'banking' outputs - which is, therefore, very likely to occur. There is particularly widespread concern about the impact on ECRs who may be hindered or even excluded from building careers beyond single fixed-term contracts.

If non-portability is to be implemented, exceptions should be made for these groups of staff.

Q18. 10d. What comments do you have on sharing outputs proportionally across institutions?

Given the difficulties in verifying eligibility already described, the administrative burden associated with this option is considered unworkable. For example, sharing double-weighted outputs (monographs/portfolios) would be workable, but the forensic investigation required to calculate proportionality or divide a single journal article would not be worth the administrative effort.

A model whereby a researcher's outputs can be straightforwardly submitted by both relevant institutions in the case of moving between HEIs should be considered.

Q19. 11. Do you support the introduction of a mandatory requirement for the Open Researcher and Contributor ID to be used as the staff identifier, in the event that information about individual staff members continues to be collected in REF 2021?

Yes

Comments:

There is support for the use of ORCID with the caveat that mandatory use may incur significant financial burden for SSIs and for less research-intensive institutions. A transition period would be required at the least.

Q20. 12. What comments do you have on the proposal to remove Category C as a category of eligible staff?

This question is best addressed by individual HEIs.

Q21. 13. What comments do you have on the definition of research assistants?

Uncertainty has arisen when considering exceptions, particularly what constitutes being a PI or equivalent on a 'significant' piece of research. What is considered significant may differ between disciplines and individual interpretation.

We would highlight a suggestion from a member HEI that the independence of RAs could be established by the number of independent outputs they have to submit, rather than external criteria. That is, those with no outputs should be assumed not to be independent; those with two should be assumed to be entirely independent, and those with one to be 50% independent. This would value RA research without adding additional expectations to their roles, and without steering institutions to favour a particular model of independence.

Q22. 14. What comments do you have on the proposal for staff on fractional contracts and is a minimum of 0.2 FTE appropriate?

Yes. 0.2 contracts are common in art, design and creative media staff who are also creative practitioners in order to allow such staff to pass on skills and contribute to research culture and outputs alongside successful creative practice. These are in no way 'notional' contracts and should not be subject to additional verification processes - or, at least, such processes should be minimal to avoid unnecessary administrative burden, particularly to SSIs where such fractional contracts are widespread.

Page 6: Collaboration

Q23. 15. What are your comments in relation to better supporting collaboration between academia and organisations beyond higher education in REF 2021?

There is strong support for collaborative research in the art and design HE sector as it is an effective driver of successful interdisciplinary and practice-based research bringing additional non-research income and enriching the disciplines. The merger of impact and environment is welcomed but more granularity in indicators for reporting collaborative research impact would be welcomed.

Page 7: Outputs

Q24. 16. Do you agree with the proposal to allow the submission of a reserve output in cases where the publication of the preferred output will post-date the submission deadline?

Yes

Q25. 17. What are your comments in relation to the assessment of interdisciplinary research in REF 2021?

Interdisciplinarity is one of the major strengths of art, design and creative media research. However, we are aware of concerns relating to interdisciplinary assessments leading to 'double jeopardy' as outputs may be held accountable to the expectations of two or more distinct disciplines. It is generally felt that clearer definitions and cross-referencing between panels is required in order to build confidence in submitting research as interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinary 'Champions' have also been suggested but it is difficult to comment on this because of the lack of detail about how referrals, champions, etc. would actually work. Mandating an interdisciplinary checkbox without addressing these concerns could be counter-productive.

Q26. 18. Do you agree with the proposal for using quantitative data to inform the assessment of outputs, where considered appropriate for the discipline? If you agree, have you any suggestions for data that could be provided to the panels at output and aggregate level?

Yes

Comments:

There is broad support for the findings of The Metric Tide report. However, we would add that there are issues specific to the use of quantitative data to assess practice as research outputs submitted to UoA 34 which could lead to misleading results because its outputs frequently take innovative forms which would not be adequately captured by quantitative measures. In addition to traditional forms of research data, such as citation data, some use of social media metrics would reflect the realities of current research. However care should be taken not to encourage 'gaming' of social media through releasing research as click-bait, etc. Use of quantitative data should not erode a firm commitment to peer review as the primary approach to assessment.

Page 8: Impact

Q27. 19. Do you agree with the proposal to maintain consistency where possible with the REF 2014 impact assessment process?

Yes

Comments:

There is strong support for maximum continuity as the impact component of REF 2014 is generally felt to have worked well and become established as a valued indicator of research excellence.

Q28. 20. What comments do you have on the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of impact?

Broadening and deepening the definition of impact is desirable to capture benefits of research as widely as possible. We welcome recognition of a broader definition of impact to include social and other types of impact and it is important across all panels to ensure that all types of impact are judged on their own merits and that one type of impact is not favoured over another.

Insofar as the intention is to capture effects that travel outside academia, impact on teaching would seem viable as students carry knowledge to future employers, whereas impacts on the creation of the disciplines would seem examples of academic impact only and thus of a different kind from the impact measured in REF 2014.

Q29. 21. Do you agree with the proposal for the funding bodies and Research Councils UK to align their definition of academic and wider impact?

Yes

If yes, what comments do you have on the proposed definitions?

CHEAD supports the alignment of the definitions of academic and wider impact for the funding bodies and UKRI. Difference in approach was unhelpful and caused confusion. We support the inclusion of academic impact as a valid type of impact, but we would value clear guidance from the main panels on what constitutes 'ground breaking' academic impact. Impact outside academia should also include advances in understanding, methods, theory, application and research practice. A mandatory proportion of applied impact case studies might ameliorate a tendency to fall back into a narrower interpretation of academic impact.

Q30. 22. What comments do you have on the criteria of reach and significance?

There seems no appetite for change in this regard.

Q31. 23. What do you think about having further guidance for public engagement impacts and what do you think would be helpful?

Public engagement is another key strength of research submitted to UoA 34 but we would welcome further guidance in general.

In particular, it would be helpful to have a crisper definition of the distinction between public engagement as dissemination and as impact. Related to this, it would be useful to have examples of evidence for the latter as distinct from the former. It should be noted that measuring impact in public engagement events can itself be performative, in the sense that measurement activities themselves may affect people's experiences and engagement and this should be recognised and clarified. Our members would also welcome clearer guidance on the expectations of specific panels.

Q32. 24. Do you agree with the proposal that impacts should remain eligible for submission by the institution or institutions in which the underpinning research has been conducted?

Yes

Comments:

While impact should not be portable, the conditions and timeframes around underpinning research are restrictive and do not reflect the continuum of research. Impacts are often achieved by sustained programmes which may travel across institutions and have 'long tails'. Impacts are often difficult to ascribe to any single output (as recognised by the proposal to allow bodies of work to be submitted) which means apportioning impact across institutions will be problematic. We would welcome more flexibility, in particular with the criterion that the impact was demonstrably generated at the submitting institution. Alternatively, in the case of staff mobility, impact case studies could be submissible by all relevant organisations.

Q33. 25. Do you agree that the approach to supporting and enabling impact should be captured as an explicit section of the environment element of the assessment?

Yes

Q34. 26. What comments do you have on the suggested approaches to determining the required number of case studies? Are there alternative approaches that merit consideration?

There are general concerns that a steep increase in the number of case studies required to match a rise in outputs submitted would be burdensome and we refer back to Qs 8 and 9.

Q35. 27. Do you agree with the proposal to include a number of mandatory fields in the impact case study template to support the assessment and audit process better (paragraph 96)?

Yes

Comments:

Mandatory fields would clarify the requirements for impact case studies for submitting UoAs and thus could be helpful. The catch will be that mandatory fields will need to avoid pre-figuring impact case studies in a way that constrains possible forms of impact.

Q36. 28. What comments do you have on the inclusion of further optional fields in the impact case study template?

There are concerns that the danger of optional fields is that they may be seen as 'desirable' or even 'mandatory in practice' by submitting institutions. The perception may be that impact made by funded projects is somehow more creditable than internally-funded activities leading to impact.

However, a list of project partners (except where there is commercial or other sensitivity) and any associated funding scheme could be useful although it is important to avoid any implication that funded research is of higher value as research.

Q37. 29. What comments do you have in relation to the inclusion of examples of impact arising from research activity and bodies of work, as well as from specific research outputs?

Generally welcomed as it seems vital in accurately reflecting how impact is made via research. We note, however, that this will add serious complications to issues such as assigning impact to institutions and assessing thresholds for underlying research activity.

Q38. 30. Do you agree with the proposed timeframe for the underpinning research activity (1 January 2000 - 31 December 2020)?

Yes

Q39. 31. What are your views on the suggestion that the threshold criterion for underpinning research, research activity or a body of work should be based on standards of rigour? Do you have suggestions for how rigour could be assessed?

We appreciate that rigour, as a threshold criterion, may mitigate against the reward of low-quality work that becomes well-known. Establishing a different threshold criterion for impact than is used for outputs may add burden to the submission process, however.

Establishing rigour is also problematic and potentially controversial for many forms of practice research, where experimentation is often held to be more valuable than conformance to established methods. For practice research and its impacts, originality and significance may reflect better the sorts of contributions that lead to impact. It would seem to make more sense for the sub-panels to continue to assess the underpinning 2* threshold for originality, significance and rigour.

Q40. 32a. The suggestion to provide audit evidence to the panels?

This depends entirely on the type of audit information that would be demanded. For many forms of impact (cultural, public engagement, etc.) tracing specific events leading to impact – especially if these are to be distinguished from dissemination – can be highly problematic.

We would also highlight the challenges our members have experienced in providing audit evidence on submission - where beneficiaries may be unable or unwilling to provide evidence for impact where information may not be available, beneficiaries lacking resources to collect and collate evidence, or sensitivities and lack of authorisation to share such evidence. There was not always a great awareness of REF and its requirements in industry and collating evidence can be complex and costly.

Q41. 32b. The development of guidelines for the use and standard of quantitative data as evidence for impact?

This is again highly problematic for the impacts made by many forms of practice as research, in particular. What is the equivalent of 'quality adjusted years or generated income' for an artwork, or exhibition, or public engagement event?

We refer to our Q23 response that measuring impact in public engagement events can itself be performative, in the sense that measurement activities themselves may affect people's experiences and engagement. A requirement for quantitative measures of impact is likely to exacerbate this significantly. Who would want to fill in a questionnaire after every visit to an exhibition, or performance of a play? What metrics can be used for the impact – as distinguished from 'reach' alone – of press attention, or social media activity?

Beneficiaries may be unable or unwilling to supply evidence in the formats required.

Q42. 32c. Do you have any other comments on evidencing impacts in REF 2021?

Problems around evidencing certain forms of impact – for instance cultural or public engagement – need to be recognised and addressed for REF 2021, or these will certainly be undervalued in comparison to those that are easier to trace and measure.

Q43. 33. What are your views on the issues and rules around submitting examples of impact in REF 2021 that were returned in REF 2014?

There is support for recognising continuing impact of activities that may have been reported in REF 2014. However, 'additionality' (which we take to mean activities to promote continued impact, as well as further research) should not be required in all instances.

To balance with the desire to incentivise new areas of impact, our members have suggested that units should be allowed to submit impacts returned in 2014 as a certain proportion of their case studies, if no significant additionality is evidenced. Where there has been significant additionality, impact case studies returned in 2014 should not be penalised in 2021.

Page 9: Environment

Q44. 34a. Do you agree with the proposal to change the structure of the environment template by introducing more quantitative data into this aspect of the assessment?

Yes

Comments:

There is, however, some caution here. We do not object to more quantitative data per se, but have reservations that this should not be based on existing resources but on a rich range of indicators and we note the value of narratives in distinguishing UoAs in terms of their intentions, philosophies and 'styles' which we understand was an important factor in 2014 assessments.

Q45. 34b. Do you have suggestions of data already held by institutions that would provide panels with a valuable insight into the research environment?

This is best responded to by individual HEIs.

Q46. 35. Do you have any comment on the ways in which the environment element can give more recognition to universities' collaboration beyond higher education?

The inclusion of impact in the REF 2014 is seen as a pivotal driver in promoting and rewarding collaborative research. The proposed merger of the impact template and the research environment narrative provides opportunity to further incentivise collaborations beyond academia.

Q47. 36. Do you agree with the proposals for providing additional credit to units for open access?

No

Comments:

Whilst we strongly support the principles of open access, there are caveats and similar resource issues relating to ORCID also apply here.

Q48. 37. What comments do you have on ways to incentivise units to share and manage their research data more effectively ?

Not all institutions have received funding to develop open access and we would strongly recommend that the open access agenda is supported by more resource as well as reward, otherwise there is a risk that some HEIs will be rewarded mainly for having more resource.

Page 10: Institutional level assessment

Q49. 38. What are your views on the introduction of institutional level assessment of impact and environment?

We do not find general agreement among our members. However, there is generally little support for institutional impact case studies as this could undermine or warp existing institutional research structures, and incentivise institutions to abstract strong case studies from UoAs to their detriment.

Q50. 39. Do you have any comments on the factors that should be considered when piloting an institutional level assessment?

This is best answered by individual HEIs.

Page 11: Outcomes and weighting

Q51. 40. What comments do you have on the proposed approach to creating the overall quality profile for each submission?

Reporting institutional-level assessments as a contribution to all UoA submissions risks rewarding or punishing UoAs for factors they have little control over, and reducing accountability of the institutions themselves. Institutional-level assessments should be reported separately from UoAs.

Q53. 42. Do you agree with the proposed split of the weightings between the institutional and submission level elements of impact and environment?

Yes

Comments:

This is broadly agreeable.

Page 12: Proposed timetable for REF 2021

Q54. 43. What comments do you have on the proposed timetable for REF 2021?

This is best answered by individual HEIs.

Page 14: Contact details

Q56. If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

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