

Consultation on the design of the UK's future research assessment system

BAFTSS Response to the consultation on the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP). (the future of the REF).

Submitted: 11:29 am Friday 6th May 2022.

Consultation questions and responses:

Section one: purposes of research assessment

1. In addition to enabling the allocation of research funding and providing accountability for public investment in research, which purposes should a future UK research assessment exercise fulfil? Select all that apply.
 - a. Provide benchmarking information
 - b. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities
 - c. Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation .
 - d. Create a performance incentive for HEIs.

2. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?

BAFTSS: *We consider the options offered in question one to be problematic, thus we have not answered.*

The emphasis on immediate evidenced applicable outcomes has the potential to diminish innovative and experimental and working processes that are valuable aspects of research.

The REF has also diminished the visibility of staff on fractional contracts, research staff producing non-traditional and practice-based/led research outputs, thus we call for more appropriate criteria for inclusion and assessment of a broader range of scholars, approaches and outcomes in UK higher education.

3. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.

BAFTSS: *REF guidance should further increase transparency, accountability and the protection of ECRs, researchers on fractional and fixed term contracts, and affiliated researchers through better resources and career support.*

4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

A future research assessment system should be designed to increase clarity and guidance on creative practice research and parity between tangible and intangible outputs.

Section two: setting priorities

5. To what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 9 (least important)
- a. Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact. **4**
 - b. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises) **1**
 - c. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate **5**
 - d. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development **6**
 - e. Impact of the system on research culture **2**
 - f. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing **3**
 - g. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021 **9**
 - h. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance **8**
 - i. Robustness of assessment outcomes **7**
6. Relating to research culture, to what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)
- a. Impact of the assessment system on research careers **2**
 - b. Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion: **1**
 - c. Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations) **5**
 - d. Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research **4**
 - e. Impact of the system on open research **3**
 - f. Impact of the system on research integrity **6**
7. What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? Please set out the considerations and indicate where they should be located in the list of priorities.

BAFTSS: *The options given for question 6 are not indicative of serious understanding or recognition of circumstances in which researchers on fixed term and fractional contracts work. For example, the costs associated with 'Open Research' (e.g. the costs of open access agreements and licenses to support the inclusion of illustrations in research publications) have a financial cost that is incurred directly by researchers on fractional, fixed-term contracts and affiliated/visiting researchers. Prohibitive publication costs impact on the metrics of research publications (e.g. H-index and other citation trackers) and the content (e.g. limited illustrations, colour printing incurring higher costs affects scholars publishing on the history of colour film etc) of research publications. The immense value of Early Career, Visiting and Affiliated Researchers on precarious contracts should be recognized as an integral part of the academic community and all HEIs. The REF as it is makes this aspect of the academic community invisible, failing to capture key contributors to vital research environments. Institutional support and access to funding is vital for researchers working in these circumstances.*

Thus points listed in question 7 as e and a are closely linked and should be ranked as second in terms of priority.

Criteria should make clear to HEIs that equality, diversity and inclusivity are integral to all aspects of their research cultures and environment.

The value of practice-led and practice-based research includes outputs that are intangible to immediate assessment criteria, yet evidenced through long-term measurement and qualitative assessment. These outputs are vital to the connections between society and culture. Practice-led research is an important body of work for the UK as evidenced by the monetary value that creative practice industries contribute to the GDP. For example, methodologies and working practices in creative critical thinking, innovation of the disciplines within this category fuel one of the largest contributions to UK GDP (£117 billion in 2018 - equivalent to £306 million every day) and the sector growth is approx. 7.4% year on year (5 times larger than growth across the UK Economy as a whole). (reference: Feb 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uks-creative-industries-contributes-almost-13-million-to-the-uk-economy-every-hour>).

8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

BAFTSS: *We seek ways toward a research assessment framework that encourages research careers Future UK research assessment systems must work to improve equality, diversity and inclusivity and too engage as many staff as possible in research. We seek a system that recognizes research excellence across the diversity of research roles (e.g. precarious contracts that underpin the work of research funded projects) that constitute the research community and that addresses the implications of precarious employment on institutional support to develop grant applications and outputs.*

The assessment framework must also engage with the diverse research methodologies and outputs that are generated by interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practices. For example, flexibility on UoAs might better connect with projects and outputs that combines academic researchers working with industry and museum and heritage sectors. The work that has been done to address this issue needs to continue.

This shift is vital to ensuring the growth of research culture, promoting innovation, enabling new understandings and critical reflections which enhance not just the research culture but its potential socio-economic impact by embracing and applying new and exciting methods and methodologies, interdisciplinary valuable research. We consider it important to remove the silo effect of individual disciplines. We consider that there should greater clarity and recognition of the value of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research on more than one UoA.

Section three: identifying research excellence

9. Which of the following elements should be recognized and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?

(Multiple options: 'Should be heavily weighted' – 'Should be moderately weighted' – 'Should be weighted less heavily' – 'Should not be assessed' – 'Don't know')

- a. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers) **L**
- b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards) **M**
- c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets) **H**
- d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward) **H**
- e. Engagement beyond academia **H**
- f. Societal and economic impact **M**

g. Other (please specify). **Innovative methods and practices**

10. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?

BAFTSS: *We recognize the need to provide accountability for the use of public money.*

We believe that equality, diversity and inclusivity includes the need to recognize the challenges faced by Early Career Researchers, Mid-Career and Affiliated Researchers and teachers who work on fractional and fixed term contracts, the challenges they face, and the value that these members of the academic community bring to research environments.

For question 9: external income should be weighted less heavily, but internal investment (e.g. wage costs of research staff) by HEI should be weighted more heavily.

We believe that the REF should be reshaped to provide a more agile and less bureaucratic approach that recognises the exciting and innovative research. still provide accountability for the use of public money. Less immediate outcomes that are intangible to current assessment criteria are important in terms of public engagement and innovative methodologies. Evidence of accountability for the use of public money can be demonstrated by how research is communicated, and how the public engage with research by giving more weighting to engagement both in its tangible and intangible forms.

11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know) **Yes**

- a. Originality **yes**
- b. Significance **yes**
- c. Rigour **yes**

12. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?

BAFTSS: *The criteria for assessing outputs need to focus on the granular aspects -the specificities of research and practice based methodologies – in each discipline in relation to each UoA narrative rather than overarching institutional statements that prioritize select areas of research and existing definitions of 'output.'*

13. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know) **No**

- a. Reach **No**
- b. Significance **Yes**

14. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact?

Impact narratives that are currently organized around a central piece of research also incentivize the prioritization of a single or select group of academics whilst reducing the visibility of precariously employed researchers who contribute significant levels of public engagement work. This work provides opportunities for measuring the impact of research in the humanities. In this way, the REF encourages HEIs to interpret collaborative work as a hierarchy that is organized around a singular leading researcher whose work sustains that of others. In truth, collaborative research is more egalitarian. Precariously employed staff are integral to the reach, significance and transformative impacts of the work submitted to the REF, yet many remain ineligible to receive little direct acknowledgment.

The definition of 'reach' needs to be clearer. For example, impact needs to recognize the ways in which researchers connect, inform, and facilitate the dissemination of knowledge through conversation,

public-facing events, and audio-visual works that explore local and minor connections as well as grand national and international connections.

15. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)

No

- a. Vitality **no**
- b. Sustainability **no**

16. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?

BAFTSS: *The weighting assigned to the assessment of research environment should be increased and the implications of the term 'sustainability' clarified so that greater support is given to researchers who are in precarious employment yet produce excellent research outcomes and enrich research environments.*

We consider the research environment to be a working context in which processes and methodologies are shaped, ideas are refined and new projects developed. The term 'environment' should recognize the full academic community, which includes the vital work of currently undervalued research colleagues who are on fractional and fixed term contracts or working as visiting lecturers and fellows, yet play a vital role in the diversity and culture of each university. The current REF obfuscates the visibility of these members of the wider research environment. This means that the REF provides a distorted picture and weakens its claim to offering reliable data for benchmarking.

Section four: assessment processes

17. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritize:

- a. stability **X**
- b. currency of information
- c. both a. and b.
- d. neither a. nor b.
- e. Don't know.

Answer : a

18. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information?

BAFTSS: *The exercise must allow for change. Stability, meaning sustainability of research activity and research funding allocations, is important, but research assessment must allow for units to develop research quality innovatively or for priorities to change is maintained. Stability should be prioritized over the idea of 'currency', which the supporting documents for this consultation on the future of the REF infer as an increase in the frequency of REF assessments. Research takes time.*

19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?

- a. Yes, split by main panel
- b. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)
- c. No **X**
- d. Don't know.

Answer: No

20. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

BAFTSS: *A rolling assessment where outputs, impact and environment are treated as different categories to be assessed at different times (as inferred by the supporting documents for this consultation exercise) would make it harder to articulate their complex interconnectedness. A rolling assessment split by panels would also create a state of permanent REF and hugely increase the bureaucratic burden which could lead to instability in the sector by leaving too little time for reflection, reassessment of strategic aims and planning for the future. A rolling REF would be antagonistic to the purpose of the REF, which is to create data for benchmarking, but would be equally inimical to other proposed purposes around informing decision-making by HEIs and other relevant bodies. Similarly, dividing the exercise by main panel would make collaboration across panels and elements difficult and might produce unintended consequences for cross, inter and transdisciplinary research and researchers.*

21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?

- a. Individual
- b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas **X**
- c. Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes
- d. Institution
- e. Combination of b. and d.
- f. Combination of c. and d.
- g. Other (please specify)

Answer: b

22. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise?

BAFTSS: *The institutional environment statement is useful inasmuch as panels can read unit-level environment statements to see how they fit into a broader picture. However, institutional statements are unhelpful in that they can create an alternative and potentially competing picture that provides a useful, yet false representation of the granularity of research environments, outputs and impacts. The vitality and sustainability of each specific research environment is best evidenced at unit-level. While institutional environments can speak to research support structures across the university (library services, researcher skills training, faculty research offices, faculty and cross-faculty institutes and research groups) they should be distinct from the specificities of unit-level environment statements.*

With regard to specific UoAs, as a subject association representing Film, Television and Screen Studies, the research undertaken by our members was typically returned in REF2021 either in UoA33, UoA34 UoA32. We believe that these UoAs should be sustained, but accommodate research undertaken as film and screen studies, media and communications, and practice elements under the umbrella of one UoA, whilst retaining the scope for inclusion of cross-trans- and interdisciplinary research projects in other UoAs. We do recognize that Film and Screen Studies – and- Media and Communications – and their practitioners (Film and Audio-Visual based practitioners) have long-established histories and well-defined often distinctive academic communities. However, these research areas work closely together

and across other UoAs in terms of inter-, cross- and transdisciplinary methodologies, critical and historical analyses, and filmmaking and media practices. The value and complexity of this work and its collaborative practices work must be recognized and accommodated by the REF.

23 To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)

- a. Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment
- b. Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
 - iii. Environment
- c. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
 - iii. Environment
- d. **Should not be used at all. X**
- e. Other (please specify)

Answer: d

24 Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

BAFTSS: *A metrics-based system would disadvantage non-standard research outputs (art and film works, photography, performance, audiovisual installations) and thus suppress HEIs willingness to support risk-taking, challenging, innovative, transdisciplinary and other 'non-traditional' modes of research. A qualitative approach to the peer review of outputs and impact would be more responsive to the nuance of research methodologies and outputs including filmmaking, audiovisual installations, and performance. We do see value in some value in limited use of metrics in the assessment of environment. It is important that assessment frameworks do not simply replicate inequalities.*

25 How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?

BAFTSS: *Require less assessment at an institutional level. Allow the return of a diverse articulation of research, that moves away from the standardized institutional model implied by current research assessment frameworks. The REF, reshaped, should reflect the diversity of research (e.g. film, animation etc.) This would truly promote diversity and equality.*

BAFTSS Responses: submitted by Liz Watkins (University of Leeds), Gabor Gergely (University of Lincoln), Shreepali Patel (London College of Communications), Louis Bayman (University of Southampton) and Johnny Walker (Northumbria University) on behalf of the BAFTSS Executive Committee in discussion with MeCCSA.