

2 October 2017

## Royal Society's response to initial decisions on REF 2021

1. This response draws on detailed statements from the Society on the Research Excellence Framework (REF), including a response to the Stern Review of REF in March 2016<sup>1</sup> and a response to the consultation on the second REF in March 2017.<sup>2</sup>
2. In its previous responses the Society made the case for a truly institutionally-focused REF, which would remove any identification of or emphasis on the individual. This more holistic approach would assess the quality of an institution's research environment and the outputs and impact of this. The assessment would be evidenced by a portfolio of research outputs from the institution's constituent units of assessment (UoA), and would include outputs that meaningfully represented the quality and breadth of research carried out at that institution. The Society believes this would create the conditions necessary to better recognise and reward the full range of activities core to many research roles, including public engagement and outreach, policy work, translation to industry and more.
3. The Society is disappointed that REF 2021 will not be institutionally based, and its position remains that this would be the best approach. However, it welcomes proposals to broaden the institutional-level information to be included in the UoA environment template, and the commitment to pilot the standalone assessment of the institutional-level environment and institutional-level impact case studies to inform future REF exercises. The Society also welcomes the commitment to a broader UoA environment template for REF 2021, which will include information on the use of more quantitative data, diversity and equality, the approach to enabling impact, collaboration, interdisciplinary research, and open research. The Society would be pleased to support the development of this guidance in the months ahead. Additional areas that could be included are research strategies, staff strategies including hiring policies and career development, public and stakeholder engagement and leadership.<sup>3</sup>
4. Given the establishment of UKRI and the new realities of the funding landscape, the Society is pleased that the definition of impact used by Higher Education research funders, Research Councils, and by UKRI, once established in April 2018, will be the same. As stated previously, the impacts of curiosity-driven research are often not apparent until long after the original research has taken place and the Society believes the REF should continue to include the impact of research undertaken outside of the REF assessment period. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of guidelines on this, as well as to feed in to the development of guidance on the criteria for impact of 'reach and significance' and impact arising from public engagement.
5. In a previous position the Society noted that discipline-specific assessment conducted by peer review through the UoA, allowing for consideration of interdisciplinary research, continues to be the most appropriate model for the REF as this most accurately reflects the research process and environment. We would welcome further information about measures that will be put in place to build on the valuable comparability exercises carried out between subject groups within main panels. We suggest that consideration be given as to whether discussions of comparability might

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<sup>1</sup> <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2016/response-to-stern-review/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2017/consultation-response-second-research-excellence-framework-REF/>

<sup>3</sup> See Annex A, <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/Publications/2017/17-03-2017-royal-society-REF-position-paper.pdf>

usefully be extended to the main panels themselves. The Society welcomes the proposals to refine the assessment process and to obtain enhanced background documentation from UoA, particularly for impact case studies (paragraph 24). However, such information should be routinely available without special request to all sub-panel members, unless matters of security or confidentiality prevent this.

6. The Society is pleased that the Stern proposal on non-portability has been accepted as a way forward for future REF exercises and welcomes in-depth dialogue on how to make this a success.<sup>4</sup> For REF 2021, clear messages and guidance about what a double-counting approach means for researchers and for HEIs must be published as soon as possible.
7. The Society believes that decoupling outputs from researchers is essential to the continued improvement of research culture at UK institutions. The methodology proposed continues to link staff and outputs and presents a number of issues. The proposed approach would make institutions responsible for determining who is eligible for submission, rather than setting out a shared and transparent methodology for all institutions. The proposed approach would not address the distortions in the system arising from over-valuing particular types of research output and could strengthen rather than weaken the incentives to change contracts. There is also a danger that some institutions may use these eligibility criteria as performance management tools.
8. The Society has previously called for the introduction of a new volume measure that defines the number of research outputs required in any institutional submission; for example derived from an average number of staff engaged in research including postdoctoral staff. The Society understands that HEFCE has explored this possibility and that, in the context of current data availability, has concluded that there is no reliable way of measuring volume without the use of headcount. The Society would welcome the opportunity to work with HEFCE to understand what kinds of data might need to be collected or analysed in order to develop a different volume measure.<sup>5</sup> Of course, any change would need to be tested widely within and beyond the university sector to ensure it did not disadvantage any institutional group within the sector.
9. The Society will continue to press the case for future REF exercises to adopt a truly institutional focus.

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex B, <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/Publications/2017/17-03-2017-royal-society-REF-position-paper.pdf>. The Society's discussion with early careers researchers showed support for a move to non-portability on the whole.

<sup>5</sup> One option for a volume measure that could possibly be tested would be to count up all the people with research in their contract and then multiply that number by the mean amount of time spent on research by those people. Most universities have those data already based on information required for Full Economic Cost calculations for research.