



Political Studies
Association

Survey of PSA members regarding the REF2014 experience

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Earlier this year, in May/June, the Political Studies Association conducted a survey of its membership to find out about their experience of the recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) and their views on the process and its implications for individuals and the discipline more widely. Our aim was to generate insights into the impact of the REF, how it was interpreted by HEIs and departments, the feelings of academics at different levels towards the process and its outcome, and the consequences for political studies in the U.K., with a view to how the PSA can better support and manage these consequences in future. The findings of the survey may be of use to members engaged in evaluating the REF2014 process, and performance against different criteria, and also to those planning for any future research assessment frameworks. The PSA intends to use the findings to inform how it responds to future assessments of research quality and how it can better support its members and the study of politics more generally.

The survey firstly asked a series of questions relating to the process by which people were, or were not, entered as part of their UoA's submission to the REF panel, and their views on their experience of that process. It next asked questions relating to operation of the REF process, and its implications for political studies as a discipline. In this report we summarize the main findings of the survey and draw out some of the recurring issues. Our report is structured such that it first reviews the nature of participation in REF2014 among the respondents, the nature of preparations by HEIs for the REF, overall satisfaction with the process and its transparency, and views on the handling of specific evaluations (such as monographs). We start with information on the respondents to the survey.

1. Sample

The survey was distributed to the full mailing list of PSA members on 18th May 2015, and was closed on 8th June 2015. In total, 132 individuals responded to the survey, which is approximately 11% of current PSA members who are UK/EU academics. Of these, 67% were male and 33% female. The year in which respondents had been awarded their PhD ranged from 1962 to 2015, with the mean year of award being 1997. In terms of HEI, 55% of respondents were from Russell Group universities, 15% from 1994 Group universities, 18% from other pre-1992 universities, and 12% from post-1992 universities. Finally, respondents made up a good cross-section of sub-fields; with selected areas reported in the table below.

Research area	Percentage (multiple responses permitted)
Political parties	24%
Political theory	23%
Public policy	23%
Comparative institutional politics	22%
Elections	17%
Public administration	12%
Politics and social issues	12%
Security	9%

Political economy	9%
Constitutional issues	8%
Public attitudes and engagement	8%
Territorial politics	8%
Gender and politics	7%
Participatory and deliberative democracy	7%

Overall then, the sample provided a wide cross-section of the discipline. We cannot say whether individuals who responded to the survey held disproportionately positive or negative attitudes towards REF, but the relative balance of responses suggest that there was no obvious bias in the sample.

2. Participation in REF2014

The selective nature of REF2014 gave departments and universities some discretion in deciding how to structure their submission (this subsequently gave rise to use of 'research intensity' scores,¹ to adjust for rates of submission within departments). Of the respondents, 84% (108 of 128) were entered into the REF, suggesting quite a broad entry across the discipline. From our survey there is little evidence that any sub-disciplines or methodological specialties were subject to bias against inclusion. In terms of qualitative responses on who was responsible for the entry of individuals to the REF, a range of approaches were noted: including formal internal REF panel decisions following university guidelines, the use of internal and external assessors to review cases, and the use of metrics to rank individuals. Within these responses there were a range of perspectives, with some suggesting that the internal selection processes could have been more transparent and the basis of decisions made openly available.

Of PSA members, 73% indicated that their department had been returned to the Politics and International Studies unit of assessment (UoA21). At the individual level there was slightly more variation in participation in REF2014, with 64% entered into UoA21 and 20% entered into another panel. This highlights that while PSA members experiences of the REF mainly relate to the Politics and International Studies UoA, a substantial number were assessed by other panels. This likely reflects the overlap of the discipline with fields such as area studies, geography and others, and points to the importance of the PSA maintaining a view beyond UoA21.

Of our respondents, 20% (25 of 121) indicated that they had applied for a reduction in outputs due to individual circumstances (e.g. early career, period of absence) with most of these requests being successful (just four respondents indicated that their application had been refused). In the qualitative responses, some highlighted that the provisions for reductions were not sufficient and failed to allow for the lagged effects of periods of sickness/leave.

¹ Research intensity calculates the department GPA by the proportion of submitted staff to adjust for rates of under-submission (for a discussion of this metric, see Chris Hanretty 'On research intensity in #REF2014' <http://chrishanretty.co.uk/blog/index.php/2014/12/19/on-research-intensity-in-ref2014/>).

The introduction of a measure for research impact added further complexity to the REF2014 assessment process. 24% of the PSA members who responded to our survey were featured in an impact case study, suggesting that the impact of impact is still being felt by a relative minority of the profession. Qualitative responses to the survey revealed quite a diverse set of views on research impact, with several arguing that impact should be transferable in the same way as research outputs.

3. Preparation for REF2014

Increasingly, research assessments such as REF2014 impose a substantial burden on individuals, departments and HEIs in the run-up to submissions. One of the defining features of this context is uncertainty over the rules and processes. Our respondents were generally in either agreement or strong agreement (63%) that they had been well-informed about the REF process overall. This nevertheless meant that a sizeable proportion of PSA members (25%) disagreed that they were well-informed about the REF. Effective communication of the criteria and processes of REF are crucial both for supporting a high quality of submissions from within political studies to the REF and for enhancing its legitimacy within the profession.

There were high levels of concern about the amount of guidance provided on how research impact was measured in REF2014. Some 73% of respondents indicated that there was too little guidance on how impact would be measured. This clearly reflects both the newness of research impact to submissions this time, but also the broader difficulties of generating, demonstrating and measuring impact within the census period. Qualitative responses to the survey also expressed concern about the clarity of expectations and measurement:

“...it was frustrating to have the goal posts moved without warning and without proper guidance, foresight or consideration for the consequences.”

“...[the] policy developed too much over time...”

Most departments carried out ‘Mock REF’ exercises of some sort or another, with 77% of respondents being entered into internal mock exercises. Some felt this was useful in enabling individuals and departments to gain a better understanding of what to expect in the actual REF. Others noted that these exercises were also used as a means of deciding who would be included in the HEI’s submission. One of the qualitative responses to the survey suggested mock REFs carried disproportionate influence in managerial terms, yet were not subject to same scrutiny/independence of the actual evaluations, which are not released.

“... all panel evaluations of research should be made available to departments. Otherwise individuals are actually evaluated on mock REFs, which are far less independent.”

4. Satisfaction

In relation to the REF process and final assessment, views of our respondents were mixed. Overall satisfaction with the process was quite low, with 35% indicating that they were satisfied and 46% dissatisfied. In terms of qualitative responses, both positive and negative aspects were noted:

“The REF has a very positive impact in emphasising quality over quantity and valuing research (so they can't get away with giving us too much teaching). It also drives up academic salaries.”

“Far too time-consuming; damages morale and sense of security of some colleagues; tends to set departments against each other internally.”

An area of particular concern was the level of transparency around the assessment of the research environment, with 59% of our respondents highlighting this. The qualitative comments raised questions about the assessment of environment. One response observed:

“Environment is still a mystery, which few understand.”

More positively there was broad consensus that the time period between submission and REF outcome was about right (83% agreed with this). This suggests there is little appetite for a system of more regular or even rolling assessment. Currently the view on the use of metrics is that this is about right (with 29% saying there is too much, 48% supporting the status quo, and 23% saying there is too little). In general, then, there is a fair level of dissatisfaction about the REF process and concern about specific aspects, opinion was fairly split overall.

5. Evaluation and weighting

The weighting of outputs in REF2014 was identified as an area of further concern by our respondents. Almost half (46%) were of the view that the relative evaluation of monographs, book chapters, and journal articles was not fair (and a further 35% did not know). In open-ended responses, the treatment of monographs was viewed as especially problematic in view of the relative amount of work that is involved in their production. Some 52% of respondents felt that the weighting of monographs was too little. Several qualitative responses to the survey favoured “double-weighting of monographs” (one qualitative response argued against double-weighting altogether). There was also support for:

“Clear guidelines on this so that management are not making decisions about what is and is not submittable, which may not be in line with the expectations of the REF panel.”

Further, guidance provided on the treatment of monographs was seen as unclear (with 42% considering the guidance as being not sufficiently clear, and 38%

considering it clear). In qualitative responses, several mentions were made for greater clarity on weighting of monographs; e.g. *“Clearer position re monographs”*.

6. Summary

It is difficult to compare levels of satisfaction of the profession concerning REF2014 relative to its predecessors both due to uncertainty over the representativeness of our sample and the lack of a historical benchmark following the RAE in 2008 (i.e. an equivalent survey of the profession). Given the burdens imposed on departments and individuals by the process, one might consider a satisfaction rating of 35% (to 46%) a relative success. A number of findings stand out from this survey, however, as important for further discussion and consultation as preparations for future incarnations of REF proceeds. Firstly, transparency and the clarity of guidelines concerning a wide range of criteria (e.g. impact, monographs, research environment) are crucial for legitimacy of and satisfaction with the process. Secondly, there remain questions about the relative weighting and evaluation of different types of research output, especially monographs. Thirdly, and finally, while there overall is satisfaction with how informed people feel about the REF in general, specific elements remain poorly understood. One issue not touched upon here is the requirement for Green open access for submitted research outputs in future. Other rule changes may likewise yet disrupt the profession’s planning for future research assessments.



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