

British International Studies Association & Political Studies Association

RESPONSE TO LORD STERN'S REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK – JOINT WORKING GROUP ON REF 2020

We broadly welcome many of the Stern Review's proposals. The Stern review has reflected positions that we as the joint PSA-BISA Working Group put forward, namely the continuation of peer review in particular and the importance of continuing the block grant system. It also broadly advocates incremental change. The Stern Review also stresses the importance of addressing the perversities of the existing system, especially in terms of interdisciplinary research.

Overall, the Stern review places great confidence in institutions' management of the process, which does not sufficiently acknowledge that, according to the Stern Review itself, the main drivers of the cost of the REF have been the institutions themselves. While the proposals therefore do encourage some more flexibility, it is unlikely that the proposed changes are actually cost reducing. (It is worth noting that the main reference in the Stern Review to evidence relates to the submissions from institutions, which are unlikely to acknowledge their own failings and their propensity to drive costs.)

In the following, we set out the key proposals by the Stern review that require, in our view, more careful consideration as HEFCE is developing its position.

- A) **All research-active staff should be submitted** (recommendation 1). This reflects widespread concern (also noted in our discussions) about 'gaming' via selectivity. The idea of a 100 per cent submission is in principle not problematic, however, one should explore further the potential ways in which institutions may respond to this requirement. In particular, we are concerned with potential pressures on staff to move on to teaching-only contracts. Furthermore, there might be pressures on researchers to be classified as 'non-independent researchers', which will have clear implications for early career researchers.
- B) **Outputs should be submitted on the basis of a set average number per FTE with some flexibility for researchers to submit more or fewer than the average** (recommendation 2). The Report discusses an average of 2 outputs per person, with flexibility between 0 and 6 outputs per person. The intention here is to reduce the reading load, while also bringing in more flexibility for those researchers who may not have more than 2 outputs. The report also suggests concerns with the 'grading' of the different outputs. It is therefore not clear whether a 'reduction' to an average of 2 outputs per research-active staff might have the effect of increasing potential 'grading error'. Decoupling of outputs is supposed to also reduce the complexities of taking into consideration personal circumstances. However, basing the calculation on FTEs might have a discouraging effect on institutions in recruiting early career researchers or those taking maternity leave.

Furthermore, the possibility to allow for up to 6 outputs places great faith in institutions' review processes: whereas in the past, institutions were supposedly interested in encouraging a 'personal best' contribution from their research active staff, the Stern Review envisages a system in which institutions are in a position to rank their staff's outputs against each other. Such a high degree of variability opens the door to potential discrimination on the basis of discipline-specific cleavages surrounding research traditions (similarly, a reliance on citation counts is likely to lead to biases on the basis of gender, ethnicity and seniority). Further consideration should be given

to the average number of outputs that are required and the potential range of outputs that any one individual may submit. The present proposal is likely to encourage a bifurcation of research-active staff between 'high value' (6 output submitting) and 'low value' (0/1 submitting) researchers. Such a tendency is not desirable as it will weaken the broad support for researchers under the '4 output' model. If one wanted to follow the principle outlined in the Stern Review, then a smaller range might be advisable (i.e. an average of three with researchers being able to submit 2-4 outputs). Further consideration needs to be given to potential gaming effects. The Stern Review is also silent on the question of double-weighting.

- C) **Outputs are not portable - once an output has been 'accepted', it 'belongs' to the specific institution** (recommendation 3). The idea behind this proposal is to reduce the 'transfer market' close to the REF deadline which incurs salary increase pressure and might penalise units for their work, if their researchers are 'poached'. The basic principle underlying this recommendation is to be supported. Nevertheless, there are a number of issues that require further clarification. One is whether early career researchers (i.e. at the time of PhD completion) will be disadvantaged. One possible solution would be to exempt early career researchers (e.g. those within 3 years of award of PhD) from the rules on non-portability of research outputs. The other problem is a clearer identification as to how 'acceptance' will be defined and policed. The same applies to the definition of output to be submitted by hiring institutions ('after joining the institution'). This proposal seems problematic also in the sense of discouraging institutions to embark on expansion (or even new establishment) of particular subject groups.
- D) **Move to institutional level impact case studies** (recommendation 5). The Stern Review expresses our Working Group's concern about the perverse effects of the 2014 system. The institutional level perspective is also likely to support more interdisciplinary work which is to be supported.
- E) **Wider definition of impact.** The PSA/BISA submission noted that the key issues with the 2014 process were uncertainty and verifiability of the actual impact. These concerns are shared by the Review (recommendations 6/7). The broader definition of impact is to be welcomed, but we emphasise the importance of early guidance on the criteria for 'impact'.
- F) **Move to a double-environment statement** (recommendations 8/9), with an emphasis on an institutional-level environment statement and a shorter UoA environment statement, supported by metrics. The Report stresses the importance of acknowledging 'service to the discipline', however, the proposed system is unlikely to achieve that effect. It might be more helpful to turn the emphasis of the proposed environment statement around, with a central UoA statement supported by a broader institutional statement.
- G) The Review suggests that a 'more strategic and imaginative use' of the REF should be made by the Government and UKRI. The proposed means of doing so, such as international academics, are unlikely to achieve this and the overall recommendation (11) is unclear in its purpose.
- H) We also encourage greater attention to be paid to the potential interaction of future REF and TEF frameworks.