

British International Studies Association & Political Studies Association

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

11 March 2016

Summary

The British International Studies Association (BISA) and the Political Studies Association (PSA) are the two professional bodies representing the political science profession in the UK.

We welcome the review's remit to consider the future of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in terms of efficient allocation of funding, reduction of administrative burdens and encouragement of research excellence. This submission emphasizes four central themes:

- The REF and its predecessors have many purposes, of which the allocation of QR is one. Any meaningful research assessment exercise needs to consider the numerous purposes, such as benchmarking of institutions and disciplines and the general promotion of international research competitiveness of the UK higher education sector;
- Among the central cost drivers has been uncertainty about changing assessment criteria, with the introduction of 'impact' the most recent one. One central means of reducing cost would be to maintain broad stability in approach with early communication of criteria;
- Metrics neither offer a credible and unbiased nor necessarily cost-reducing means of measuring research quality;
- In the light of extensive gaming by institutions, submissions of all eligible staff should be encouraged. Although all systems will encourage some form of gaming, the current system's biases in terms of equality and diversity cannot be defended. Any system of submitting individuals must not cause detriment to disciplinary variety and the encouragement of individual 'citizenship' in promoting a sustainable research environment within institutions and across disciplines.

1. *What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, the impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?*

A. We support the continuation of the dual funding system and stress the importance of protecting the core QR funding. We support the differentiated distribution of QR funding based on a robust and transparent system of assessment of research produced across units of assessment within each institution. While the current system of peer review has attracted criticism, it remains the preferred way of assessing research quality. We therefore favour the centrality of peer review that is open to disciplinary diversity. Such a system, operated on a

frequency of 5-6 years, is, at the present time, most likely to offer a credible approach to fulfilling the multiple objectives of the REF.

- B. Metrics might offer useful information in some areas of the natural and medical sciences, but for political science (and the social sciences more broadly), metrics are known to be very poorly associated with measures of research quality peer review. The actual cost of relying on metrics has not been fully established and, at the current time, a reliance on metrics without careful contextual (peer) consideration would tend to reinforce particular biases between disciplines and researchers; for example, by failing to recognize differences between early career and established researchers, or differences due to career breaks and interruptions. Metrics from a range of credible and auditable sources (i.e. scopus, web of science, google scholar, altmetric) should be provided to sub-panels in a consistent way, and used at the panels' discretion to inform their peer review assessments.
- C. One of the key cost drivers over the course of previous research assessment exercises has been changing assessment methods. The introduction of 'impact' has been the most recent one. The cost of these modifications was increased by the absence of timely guidance to institutions. While small changes and improvements can be identified, we advocate a period of broad stability in overall approach. The role of impact should therefore not be altered or re-defined, although there might be scope for changing the administrative process ('template') in which impact is being reported. There is also scope for defining more clearly the criteria for what constitutes 'excellent' impact. Furthermore, impact must not be used to advantage some sciences over others and despite commitments by HEFCE that assessment of impact would be assessed according to each sub-panels own terms, there needs to be a better system of moderation between the four main panels.
- D. One further central cost driver has been the uncertainty about evolving assessment criteria. This led, in turn, to issues regarding the recruitment of impact assessors and their expectations as to the work involved in assessing impact. It is important to encourage an open view about forms of impact that is not biased by geographical factors and stages in career. The existing 'impact template' has proven ineffective and requires revision. The emphasis should be on incentivising a sustainable environment for generating impact over time that involves early career researchers.
- E. It is an obligation for the professional associations to ensure support for peer review-based sub-panels that represent their disciplines in their breadth. There is sufficient strength in the UK research community to support a peer review assessment system that is able to assess the international and world-leading qualities of research output, impact and environment. The strength of the existing pool of leading researchers in the UK means that there is no strong case for introducing international research peers. There are also further potential risks involved in such a move, due to questions of availability, selection criteria or reward. Availability of internationally respected research peers is largely a matter for UK institutions: UK universities should be encouraged to formally recognise the considerable contribution of staff members that are involved in research quality assessment.
- F. Much of the concern with the previous REF emerged at the level of individual institution, especially in terms of processes of internal selection. Particular problems emerged in the context of interdisciplinary work, with individual institutions being too focused on

'disciplinary' work. Better communication might ensure that interdisciplinary work is appropriately recognised and assessed fairly. The current system of cross-referral across sub-panels works unevenly and discourages institutions to submit interdisciplinary researchers (often to the detriment of early career researchers).

- G. Any attempt at redefining eligibility will lead to creative responses by institutions. In principle, all eligible staff should be submitted to the REF and accounted for in the results. This would provide for a more comprehensive picture of research across units of assessments and of universities. Alternative systems require careful consideration.
- H. Results should not solely be determined by outputs and impact. Environment ('context') has an important role to play to showcase research culture and service to the wider profession. Environment should neither be turned into pure metrics nor resemble an essay writing competition. Environment should not become a subordinate category of outputs.

2. If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. Impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?

- A. The premise of this question requires clarification. The REF has many purposes, one central one being the allocation of QR at the institutional level. Any meaningful research quality assessment exercise needs to consider the other purposes as well, namely the benchmarking and league-tabling of departmental and university-level research quality, the encouragement of a systematic research management approach across universities, a means to externally assess an institution's assessment of the research quality of their departments, and it is an important mechanism to promote the research competitiveness of the UK higher education sector. This competitiveness is enhanced by the disciplinary focus of the REF.
- B. Reducing the number of Units of Assessments would reduce the effectiveness of the REF in terms of the other purposes, without enhancing the quality of its assessment. Neither outputs, impacts nor environment should be reported at the institutional level. Given the diversity of size across the sector, quality assessment should be based on a level that recognises quality at the individual and research group level. The four main panels should be continued, and some limited discretion should be given to the main panels to consider the most effective organisation of its sub-panels, after consultation with the relevant stakeholders.
- C. The link between outputs and individuals should be continued. Requiring, for example, a representative sample of outputs based on four times the number of staff submitted (similar to the impact case submission formula), would place institutions in a position to select between competing outputs of different staff. This proposal is unlikely to enhance the broad support of research quality across all categories of staff; it would therefore not give a good representation of the overall research output of a unit of assessment. Such a system would also lead to the undesirable consequence of increasing the 'transfer market' of academics.

3. What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision-making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?

- A. The REF and previous research quality assessment exercises have led to profound, if diverse changes in higher education institutions. In some cases, it has been used to justify (dis)investment decisions.
- B. The REF, in terms of research outputs and impact, has become an essential criterion for promotion and appointment processes. It has shaped individual career incentives and it is therefore important that the REF process encourages citizenship. A sole focus on outputs and impact discourages important 'citizenship' work in departments, institutions and professions. The REF should therefore recognize the general promotion of research quality that goes beyond the production of individual outputs and impact case studies.
- C. A survey of PSA members has highlighted that institutions make considerable use of REF information in their decision-making. We are concerned about the extent to which REF-related information is used in promotions, for example (regardless of official statements to the contrary). Continuing anonymity of scores is therefore important to prevent individual staff being disadvantaged. REF results would be made more meaningful if they provided a more complete picture by including all eligible staff.
- D. The results of the REF are not just important for institutions; they also advance the overall status of the political science and international relations discipline internationally. They therefore strengthen the disciplinary reputation for internationally leading research.

4. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?

- A. The REF process already imposes considerable information gathering costs. No further requirements should be imposed.
- B. The REF should reflect data on all eligible staff, not just on those selected by institutions.
- C. The REF criteria need to pay more careful attention to potential effects on diversity and equality. Differences between male and female staff in terms of staff selection are highly problematic and cannot be defended by other factors, such as age or type of contracts. Data collected for the Environment dimension relating to diversity could draw on other data collection requirements, such as the Athena SWAN process.
- D. We are against the inclusion of a 'productivity' criterion, the REF should be concerned with quality.

5. How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?

- A. The REF (and earlier exercises) has been an important driver in changing the research culture across institutions and within the discipline. It has, overall, enhanced the international reputation of UK political science and international relations and thereby encouraged both student demand and international competitive recruitment and collaboration. It has also encouraged collaboration with public and private sector bodies.

- B. Including an interdisciplinarity criterion within the Environment criterion would offer institutions an incentive to recognise such work more extensively. However, an emphasis on collaboration will simply generate the temptation for artificially-generated collaboration.
- C. The inclusion of interdisciplinary work needs to be considered carefully as the current system of cross-referral across sub-panels is uneven.
- D. The Impact template needs to be made less cumbersome. There is a case for requiring institutions to report on their progress against the impact-related strategic goals set out in their 2014 submissions. These needed to be validated, but they would offer an incentive to encourage collaboration between other public and/or private sector bodies.

6. In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and/or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g., success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming in the system?

- A. The REF generally discourages disagreement from disciplinary orthodoxies. This is particularly the case at the level of institutional staff selection. We are therefore in favour of encouraging a system where all eligible staff is submitted. Through impact, the REF can encourage some less 'conservative' work than is traditionally found in research publications.
- B. There are different ways in which interdisciplinarity can be encouraged, whether this is by allowing individuals to be submitted to different panels (as part of one submission) or by encouraging better cross-referral.
- C. The REF has encouraged a 'transfer market' that has also had geographical implications. One of the consequences of this 'transfer market' has been a skewing of wages (institutionally and individually) which might also come at the expense of building long-term research capacity. A consequence of the observable geographical concentration is a likely reduction in overall research quality and resultant reduction in students across the UK being taught by research leaders in their field. International excellence in research in political science and international relations is generated across the UK, and research funding allocations should not benefit large and regionally concentrated institutions only.
- D. There needs to be greater consideration of the implications of a REF in terms of equality and diversity. For example, late-career researchers might potentially be less active in terms of generating outputs, but their contribution in supporting and leading research environments should be recognised. The definition of early-career researcher also requires clarification.

7. In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?

- A. The REF has accompanied a considerable internationalisation and professionalisation in the field of political science and international relations. In itself, the REF can only mirror wider global trends in the discipline.

- B. The REF, by its focus on its disciplines, has the potential to reinforce disciplinary boundaries, and to encourage 'conservative' scholarship.
- C. At the same time, it is important for the credibility of the REF and the credibility of the reputation of the discipline that the quality assessment reflects the diversity of traditions within the discipline and an openness to interdisciplinarity.

8. How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?

- A. All assessment has to be based on delivered and verifiable achievements and not undelivered promises. QR funding can be allocated on the basis of an acceptable research strategy that reflects research priorities in the context of diversity of research traditions. However, REF panels should not make judgements on the ways in which universities make use of QR funds.

9. Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?

- A. There needs to be close attention to ensuring the reduction of unnecessary administrative burdens. The 2014 'impact template', for example, has been widely criticized and requires replacing. Furthermore, assessment and reporting criteria need to be communicated early.

Background

In September 2015, a joint working group of the British International Studies Association (BISA, www.bisa.ac.uk) and the Political Studies Association (PSA, www.psa.ac.uk) was established to support the evolving debate regarding the REF on behalf of the political science profession in the UK. The rapporteur of this working group is Martin Lodge, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation & Department of Government, London School of Economics (m.lodge@lse.ac.uk).