Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework

Page 1: Respondent details

Q1. Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of

Subject association or learned society

Please provide the name of your organisation
Social History Society

Page 2: Overall approach

Q2. 1. Do you have any comments on the proposal to maintain an overall continuity of approach with REF 2014, as outlined in paragraphs 10 and 23?

REF 2014 introduced many changes. It is important at this point to let them embed, and maintain overall continuity.

Page 3: Unit of assessment structure

Q3. 2. What comments do you have about the unit of assessment structure in REF 2021?

In the interest of continuity and to facilitate comparability it would be appropriate to retain the revised UoA structure adopted in REF2014, while aiming to take account of disciplinary concerns, paragraph 26. They apply to cognate fields.

It is also important to take account of concerns raised in Q7, below.

Page 4: Expert panels

Q4. 3a. Do you agree that the submissions guidance and panel criteria should be developed simultaneously?

No

Comments:
Expert panels It is very important to have input from full sub-panels, who represent disciplinary breadth, while formulating the submission guidance and panel criteria. Indeed, in view of the coverage of UOA30, it would be impossible to formulate due guidance without such input. Institutions could still be advised in good time.

Q5. 3b. Do you support the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year?

No

Comments:
In view of the workload involved, the need to appoint leading research experts in their fields, and the need to monitor E&D, it would be unrealistic and counter-productive to delay the appointment of sub-panel members to near the start of the assessment year. The REF is respected among historians because of the sub-panel personnel. It is likely that a sub-panel assembled near the start of the assessment year will not achieve such credibility.

Q6. 4. Do you agree with the proposed measures outlined at paragraph 35 for improving representativeness on the panels?

Yes

Comments:
These measures are appropriate and fair.

Q7. 5a. Based on the options described at paragraphs 36 to 38 what approach do you think should be taken to nominating panel members?

The nominating approach is the most appropriate and practicable, while allowing sufficient time to recruit appropriate leaders and address equality and diversity issues.

Q8. 5b. Do you agree with the proposal to require nominating bodies to provide equality and diversity information?

Yes

Comments:
See 5a. Guidelines would need to be provided to explain processes and criteria while also indicating that the most important criterion is academic suitability.

Q9. 6. Please comment on any additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies, provided alongside the consultation document.

It is important to recognise plurality but also to enable the nationally significant nominating bodies to carry weight.

The list should also include: Arts and Humanities Alliance; British Association of South Asian Studies: http://www.basas.org.uk/ ; Black and Asian Studies Association: http://www.blackandasianstudies.org/research.html; British Association for Local History: http://www.balh.org.uk/ .

Page 5: Staff

Q10. 7. Do you have any comments on the proposal to use HESA cost centres to map research-active staff to UOAs and are there any alternative approaches that should be considered?

We support the recommendation 'that all research-active staff should be returned to the REF' and are concerned about unfair strategies of REF gaining. However, we also recommend to continue to let HEIs choose the appropriate panel according to the research submitted, as done in REF2014. Use of HESA figures would not reflect well interdisciplinary research. The Social History Society is particularly concerned that it would not take account of the fact that many historians are employed in diverse Humanities and Social Science departments/schools: for example, Economic historians in economics and business departments, and Demographic and Agricultural historians in geography. We therefore believe that it is important to retain the current flexibility.

Q11. 8. What comments do you have on the proposed definition of 'research-active' staff described in paragraph 43?

Social History Society supports full return. However, definitions would have to allow for the fact that in some institutions 'research' contractually defined includes an array of activities. It is important to monitor the proportion of academic staff in UoAs with teaching-only contracts, research-only contracts, and traditional academic teaching and research contracts, which we maintain are the best. We are concerned that teaching-only contracts would become more prevalent within the sector (sometimes alongside short-term research-only contracts), which will especially affect ECRs (who are well represented in the Social History Society). The REF should be alert to any unintended consequences of its policies in this area.

Q12. 9a. The proposal to require an average of two outputs per full-time equivalent staff returned?

In view of the issues raised we agree an average of two is acceptable and is better than sampling. However, we maintain that ECRs and staff returning from maternity/ paternity leave and prolonged sick leave should be returned with a reduced load as established in REF2014: namely a reduction of one output for an appropriate period. This should not be difficult to monitor and is only fair in view of the need to consider equality and diversity issues.. A recent survey by the RHS has revealed worrying gender inequality in History departments nationwide. It is very important not to introduce measures that might exacerbate this.

Q13. 9b. The maximum number of outputs for each staff member?

A maximum of six outputs per FTE is appropriate. It should be noted, however, that in our discipline sustained productivity of six 4* items in a cycle is rare.

Q14. 9c. Setting a minimum requirement of one for each staff member?

No. In view of the need to recognise equality and diversity issues, the minimum must be zero.

Q15. 10a. Is acceptance for publication a suitable marker to identify outputs that an institution can submit and how would this apply across different output types?

Acceptance for publication is not a suitable marker of identity for monographs, and is impossible to define and monitor. History is a monograph-oriented discipline, and therefore the use of acceptance as a marker of identity in History is inappropriate.

We recommend that the first publication date is used as a marker of identify for all books as it is the most practicable, transparent, and fair. We suggest applying it to other outputs. For example, we are aware that 'acceptance' is inconsistent defined by presses who publish many journals.

Q16. 10b. What challenges would your institution face in verifying the eligibility of outputs?

As a learned society, the Social History Society is concerned that HEIs would find it very difficult to monitor the diverse contracting and publication processes of books, which in our discipline have a long gestation period, prior to 2021 and thereafter. We are concerned that such monitoring can lead to potential abuse. In the interest of practicability, transparency, and fairness, we recommend using first publication dates.

Q17. 10c. Would non-portability have a negative impact on certain groups and how might this be mitigated?

Yes, Non-portability would have a very negative impact on History ECRs and can stand in the way of their career progression. The Social History Society has many PGRs and ECRs, and is highly conscious of their need. We strongly recommend that the outputs of ECRs and persons on fixed-term contracts should continue to be portable.

The Social History Society is also conscious of age, gender equality, flexible professional trajectories and the importance of moves among sectors. We recommend that any FTE hired from a non HEI, or after a career break of more than three years for whatever reason, should be able to port outputs.

SHS is also conscious of the diversity within our academic sector. In effect, non-portability of ECR outputs would disproportionally benefit a small number of HEIs who are wealthy enough to host post-docs. The investment of such institutions is aptly recognised under the category of 'Research Environment'. It would be unfortunate if a less research-intensive HEI, for example, that managed to hire an ECR historian on a permanent contract, would still have no benefit from their output, which would count for an 'elite' HEI where that person was employed on a short post-doctoral contract.

We need to be convinced that the point about salary inflation, mentioned as a key reason, is sufficiently evidenced across the sector, and regarding gender. We are concerned about the effect of non-portability on dynamism in the field, particularly in a discipline such ours where outputs are relatively few with a long gestation period. We need to be convinced that this significant change in the REF is based on sufficient evidence.

Q18. 10d. What comments do you have on sharing outputs proportionally across institutions?

Sharing outputs proportionately across institutions would be challenging, labour intensive, and open to dispute in disciplines such as History where many outputs have a long and diffuse gestation period, and are often not tied to externally funded projects.

Output sharing would also militate especially against ECRs working on their first book and undermine diversity, as it would disproportionately reward a small number of HEIs who have many PGRs and are wealthy enough to host post-docs. For example, less research-intensive HEIs that employ and submit research-active staff, might still have to 'share' their outputs with the HEI where that person had a post-doc. Such investment in PGRs is already recognised under 'Research Environment' and double counting would be unfair.

Q19. 11. Do you support the introduction of a mandatory requirement for the Open Researcher and Contributor ID to be used as the staff identifier, in the event that information about individual staff members continues to be collected in REF 2021?

Yes

Comments:
This would be appropriate providing it is not used for 'sharing' which is bound to have a negative effect as explained above.

Q20. 12. What comments do you have on the proposal to remove Category C as a category of eligible staff?

The removal of category 'C' staff is sensible. However in view of 7 and 8, above, a category of independent research would need to be applied. Removal of category 'C' highlights the need to allow output portability for a) ECRs and b) fixed-term contracts as explained in 10c. While the number of category 'C' FTEs is low, some of these are Britain's most promising future academics who need to be able to port outputs unless we want to make it difficult for them to get jobs.

Q21. 13. What comments do you have on the definition of research assistants?

This should be covered by 7 and 8 above, providing ECRs and fixed-term portability is addressed and a criterion of independent research is used (as in REF2014).

Q22. 14. What comments do you have on the proposal for staff on fractional contracts and is a minimum of 0.2 FTE appropriate?

Question 14: What comments do you have on the proposal for staff on fractional contracts and is a minimum of 0.2 FTE appropriate?

It is well known that such contracts are used for REF gaining. Staff submitted should include at least 0.5FTE, unless mitigating factors apply.

Page 6: Collaboration

Q23. 15. What are your comments in relation to better supporting collaboration between academia and organisations beyond higher education in REF 2021?

Staff collaboration is common in History with an array of heritage and cultural institutions and appears to be well supported. International collaboration should also be addressed.

Page 7: Outputs

Q24. 16. Do you agree with the proposal to allow the submission of a reserve output in cases where the publication of the preferred output will post-date the submission deadline?

Comments:
Yes. It is important to ensure that items not published by the deadline, but deposited in the appropriate repository, could still be submitted to the next REF.

Q25. 17. What are your comments in relation to the assessment of interdisciplinary research in REF 2021?

We see little need in appointing an interdisciplinary 'champion' for the following reasons: a) much of the work in History is interdisciplinary and we have every reason to believe that scholars are open to interdisciplinary work; b) because the historical discipline is so diverse, no 'champion' would be able to cover all crossovers, which will end up being a limitation; c) appointing the 'champion' can be complex with too many disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and equality and diversity issues.

Q26. 18. Do you agree with the proposal for using quantitative data to inform the assessment of outputs, where considered appropriate for the discipline? If you agree, have you any suggestions for data that could be provided to the panels at output and aggregate level?

Yes

Comments:
Quantitative data should be used where appropriate. But it is not appropriate in all disciplines. In History, peer review is the most appropriate assessment mode. We expect to see it continued in the History UoA in REF2021, and beyond. It is important to recognise disciplinary diversity. A discipline such as History relies on monographs and has no accepted journal ranking, which make it impossible to apply metrical measurements. The need for peer assessment, and the disadvantages of employing metrics in the historical discipline have been discussed, and widely recognised for the RAEs and for REF2014. It hasn't changed.

Page 8: Impact

Q27. 19. Do you agree with the proposal to maintain consistency where possible with the REF 2014 impact assessment process?

Yes

Comments:
Yes. Giving 'Impact' the opportunity to 'bed down' is wise. The weight given to Impact seems right.

Q28. 20. What comments do you have on the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of impact?

This would be good. Most importantly, we need to extend the recognition of impact on teaching. 'Creating a new discipline' is a tall order and is not very clear. In other areas, less radical impacts appear to be rewarded. It is important to give due weight to the impact of research on teaching curricula and resources, including tertiary education, which are a major benefit to our society.

However, we note with concern that with the current definition of Impact, analysis by the Royal Historical Society shows that early career researchers and females carry insufficient weight, and most current case studies in History are led by male professors.

Q29. 21. Do you agree with the proposal for the funding bodies and Research Councils UK to align their definition of academic and wider impact?

Yes

If yes, what comments do you have on the proposed definitions?
This might be reasonable providing it is thoroughly understood that the funding bodies are interested in future impact, and the REF is interested in impact that has been achieved. The two are not necessarily compatible.

Q30. 22. What comments do you have on the criteria of reach and significance?

Both are important, and remain difficult to gauge consistently. It is important to recognise that each of these variables can be sufficient and merit full recognition: for example, great significance even with low reach.

Q31. 23. What do you think about having further guidance for public engagement impacts and what do you think would be helpful?

It is always important to formulate models of good practice, drawing on the experience of REF2014 to enable HEIs to understand examples of 'significance' and 'reach' and how they will be measured.

Q32. 24. Do you agree with the proposal that impacts should remain eligible for submission by the institution or institutions in which the underpinning research has been conducted?

Yes

Comments:
We recognise that impact is institutionally achieved and often involves several FTEs over time, and therefore should have different portability criteria from outputs. In view of the institutional dimension, advice should be given about the role of continuity in REF2021. It is important to have guidance concerning institutional capacity building. Owing to the longevity of Impact, established staff tend to be represented. The REF should ensure that ECRs are supported by HEIs in developing Impact skills.

Q33. 25. Do you agree that the approach to supporting and enabling impact should be captured as an explicit section of the environment element of the assessment?

Yes

Comments:
This is appropriate.

Q34. 26. What comments do you have on the suggested approaches to determining the required number of case studies? Are there alternative approaches that merit consideration?

Some History departments are very small, with a handful of FTEs. In such departments, it would be fair to reduce the minimum of Impact Case Studies to one. While this will increase risk putting all the department's eggs in one basket, it could help safeguard the department within the HEI. Alternatively, it might be possible to bunch a number of such small departments within the HEI to submit one Case Study.

At the same time, we are concerned that institutional Impact Case Studies would militate in favour of STEM subjects. We maintain that each UOA submitted must have at least one Impact Case Study.

Q35. 27. Do you agree with the proposal to include a number of mandatory fields in the impact case study template to support the assessment and audit process better (paragraph 96)?

Yes

Comments:
This is sensible. Particularly, it is important to gather data on equality and diversity in the impact submission.

Q36. 28. What comments do you have on the inclusion of further optional fields in the impact case study template?

Yes, this seems sensible. It is important to gather data on equality and diversity in the History submission.

Q37. 29. What comments do you have in relation to the inclusion of examples of impact arising from research activity and bodies of work, as well as from specific research outputs?

Yes, this would be appropriate.

Q38. 30. Do you agree with the proposed timeframe for the underpinning research activity (1 January 2000 - 31 December 2020)?

Yes

Comments:

Q39. 31. What are your views on the suggestion that the threshold criterion for underpinning research, research activity or a body of work should be based on standards of rigour? Do you have suggestions for how rigour could be assessed?

Yes. The 2014 threshold of 2* should be retained. However, it would be good to broaden the base for Case Studies (above).

Q40. 32a. The suggestion to provide audit evidence to the panels?

Such evidence would vary greatly among Case studies, and its collection and auditing would increase the burden on UOAs and panels.

Q41. 32b. The development of guidelines for the use and standard of quantitative data as evidence for impact?

Such a requirement will be inconsistent with relevant criteria of significance and reach and will most likely limit very much the sort of Case Studies submitted in History.

Given that Impact is to be measured from 2000 it is important to ensure that the evidence required can be 'retrofitted' for much of this census period. It is important not to rely on evidence that will not be readily available post hoc.

Q42. 32c. Do you have any other comments on evidencing impacts in REF 2021?

After REF2014, all concerned have useful experience dealing with Impact, which will make REF2021 more manageable.

Q43. 33. What are your views on the issues and rules around submitting examples of impact in REF 2021 that were returned in REF 2014?

Based on the definition of Research Impact, it is essential to be able to demonstrate the longevity and capacity building, while proving sustainability and vitality.

The inclusion of Impact on teaching and education will enable UOAs to expand on existing case-studies.

Having said that, it would make sense to require each UOA to develop at least one new Case Study.

Page 9: Environment

Q44. 34a. Do you agree with the proposal to change the structure of the environment template by introducing more quantitative data into this aspect of the assessment?

Yes

Comments:
Social History Society shares the concern over the 'strategy' section, which contains rhetorical statements that are hard to verify. However, there is also concern about the metrics employed, namely, research income and PGR numbers, that militate in favour of a small number of HEIs that hold most AHRC funded PGRs. This means that it is very difficult for small UOAs to do well. We believe this should be addressed before employing additional metrics.

Q45. 34b. Do you have suggestions of data already held by institutions that would provide panels with a valuable insight into the research environment?

Not applicable: see above.

Q46. 35. Do you have any comment on the ways in which the environment element can give more recognition to universities' collaboration beyond higher education?

HEIs' collaboration could be reflected including any evidence currently not eligible under Impact.

Q47. 36. Do you agree with the proposals for providing additional credit to units for open access?

No

Comments:
Research data in History in a monograph-oriented discipline is usually not of the sort that can be banked. The proposal would be detrimental to a Humanities discipline such as History. In principle, the retrospective introduction of such a criterion would be unfair, and undoubtedly will be used by HEIs for REF gaming. REF criteria must be clear and transparent.

Q48. 37. What comments do you have on ways to incentivise units to share and manage their research data more effectively ?

Unlike other disciplines, historical research typically uses existing data, rather than generating new data through experimentation. Much historical material is already available on open access, or in other venues open to public use, such as archives. Historians have rich traditions of enhancing such resources which are already incentivised by the REF, for example under Impact on society and culture, and under certain types of Output. At the same time, data sharing in History is typically subject to restrictions, such as copyright. To the degree that the incentive proposed is applicable to History, it has therefore already been addressed by REF2014, and will likewise be addressed by REF2021, with even stronger Impact recognition. No further change should be made.

Page 10: Institutional level assessment

Q49. 38. What are your views on the introduction of institutional level assessment of impact and environment?

It is unclear how institutional capture would reflect on the work of individual UOAs. The bias towards STEM subjects would be obvious, to the detriment of disciplines such as History.

As it is, in our discipline Environment criteria work in favour of large HEIs, which enjoy a great deal of AHRC funding. Care must be given to the variety of HEIs to enable smaller HEIs to do well.

Q50. 39. Do you have any comments on the factors that should be considered when piloting an institutional level assessment?

It is crucial that any pilot should reflect the diversity of the HE sector in terms of size, age, mission group and perceived research intensity.

The original intent of the REF was to capture research excellence wherever it is found. It is very important to test the effect on this aim of any new measures proposed here.

Page 11: Outcomes and weighting

Q51. 40. What comments do you have on the proposed approach to creating the overall quality profile for each submission?

We recommend outputs should continue to form 65% of the assessment at the very least. As this the second time that Impact would be assessed, it is important not to raise its weight above 20%. If institutional-level assessment is to be used, it must be separate from UOA assessment, as it applies radically differently to different disciplines. The impact of institutional assessment on diversity within the sector should be carefully assessed in an appropriate pilot.

Q52. 41. Given the proposal that the weighting for outputs remain at 65 per cent, do you agree that the overall weighting for impact should remain at 20 per cent?

Yes

Comments:
See above.

Q53. 42. Do you agree with the proposed split of the weightings between the institutional and submission level elements of impact and environment?

No

Comments:
Question 42: Do you agree with the proposed split of the weightings between the institutional and submission-level elements of impact and environment? See 38 above. We believe it is important to measure UOAs to enable an array of HEIs to excel.

Page 12: Proposed timetable for REF 2021

Q54. 43. What comments do you have on the proposed timetable for REF 2021?

The timetable is beginning to look very tight as it is important to pilot new schemes. We suggest extending by a year.

Page 13: Other

Q55. 44. Are there proposals not referred to above, or captured in your response so far, that you feel should be considered? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

We are pleased to see awareness of equality and diversity issues and would like to see it embedded throughout the REF.

We highlight the need to assess UOAs to capture research excellence in UK wherever it happens to be.

Page 14: Contact details

Q56. If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

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