

BAAL response to REF consultation, 2016

In March 2016 BAAL submitted a response to the Call for Evidence issued as part of Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework. The Stern report was published at the end of July, together with a summary of evidence submitted. These documents can be viewed online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review-summary-of-views>

BAAL's response to the call for evidence was submitted by the Chair, Tess Fitzpatrick, following consultation and discussion with other BAAL members, including Greg Myers, Susan Hunston and Li Wei. The submission was made in the form of answers to a series of questions on an online form, with restricted word counts for each response. Below is the text of BAAL's responses.

QUESTION: What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, 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?

This response to the consultation stage of Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework is made on behalf of the British Association for Applied Linguistics. The Association has concerns relating to the representation of Applied Linguistics in REF2014, and we wish to ensure that our discipline receives accurate, fair and informed representation in future REF exercises.

Applied Linguistics is broadly defined as the theoretical and empirical investigation of language and communication. It encompasses research that touches many other disciplines and domains, but has at its core an attention to theory of language and to real world language contexts and issues. While the applied aspect of the discipline brings it into meaningful contact and collaboration with other domains of research, these core features, and the methods of enquiry they demand, give it a distinct central identity. As REF2014 case studies show, applied linguists do economically and socially important work that would otherwise be ignored by academic researchers.

In UK Higher Education, Applied Linguistics research units can be found within departments of education, English, languages, language and communication, linguistics, media, and others. While there is considerable variety in the size and labelling of these units, together they represent significant activity (as an indication of this, a 2016 listing of MA programmes in applied linguistics and related areas finds 125 programmes across 70 institutions <http://mag.digitalpc.co.uk/Olive/ODE/ELGAZETTE/>).

The Units of Assessment in REF 2014 did not explicitly represent Applied Linguistics at either sub-panel or research group level. Linguistics was listed under sub-panel 28 (with Modern Languages), and though some Applied Linguistics research was returned to sub-panel 28, the larger proportion of Applied Linguistics outputs was spread across sub-panel 4 (Psychology and Neuroscience), sub-panel 25 (Education), sub-panel 27 (Area Studies) and sub-panel 29 (English Language and Literature). There was insufficient representation of Applied Linguistics in the membership of all these sub-panels; we estimate that the discrepancy between panel membership and number of submissions was most acute in the Education sub-panel.

In our view the following steps would help to ensure accurate, fair and informed representation of Applied Linguistics in future REF exercises:

- 1) Representation of Applied Linguistics should be adequate (in number of panel members) and appropriate (in terms of expertise) on all sub panels to which applied linguists' work is likely to be submitted. This will provide an assurance that work submitted by applied linguists will be read and assessed by fairly and appropriately, regardless of institutional decisions about submission groupings and UoA selection. Furthermore, flexible referrals among a pool of experts across sub-panels would ensure that first *and* second readers of outputs are applied linguists (this was not the case in REF2014).
- 2) In order to ensure appropriate panel membership, learned societies and professional bodies should be invited to advise, in a timely fashion, on the appointment and selection of panel members. Measures should be taken to ensure better-informed predictions regarding the quantity of returns to each sub-panel.

QUESTION: 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?

Because Applied Linguistics research is returned to a variety of sub-panels (see above), it is not possible to extract discipline-specific information from the REF process. It would be helpful to the discipline if Applied Linguistics submissions could be explicitly identified as such; this would make it possible to extract meaningful information and metrics, and would feed into the Association's support of the on-going development and growth of our discipline.

QUESTION: 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 the system?

Institutional focus on the quality of REF submissions means that individual researchers are directed to focus their attention on outputs that will score high against the assessment criteria of rigour, significance and originality. Inevitably, corollaries emerge between REF readiness and institutional decisions relating to individuals' career progression (recruitment, promotion, research leave awards).

As a consequence of this, there are some types of research output and activity that researchers are discouraged from pursuing, because they are deemed unlikely to score well against the three REF output criteria. One example of this is replication research, which is an essential component of empirical research in our field, and which contributes to the establishment of robust and valid research conclusions. Other examples include comprehensive survey papers and metadata analyses; these capture and consolidate previous research enabling patterns of findings to be identified and interrogated; as with replication research, though, the risk of such outputs scoring low in terms of originality means that researchers are often advised against focusing on them. Outputs reporting work with non-academic bodies (e.g. language testing authorities, health authorities) can be regarded as high-risk submissions to REF, because they do not map directly onto the criteria descriptors. Researchers are therefore discouraged from producing scholarly outputs in collaboration with practitioner partners.

QUESTION: 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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

and

QUESTION: 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?

Please tell us your thoughts in no more than 500 words:

The case study approach to impact measures in the 2014 REF does not fully capture the breadth, depth and complexity of impact, nor its iterative, non-finite and (often) cross-institutional nature. This is particularly problematic for a discipline such as Applied Linguistics, in which interaction with real world research applications drives most research questions and underpins most outputs. The selective and restricted approach to impact reporting in REF2014 resulted in fierce competition for which case studies would be used, and in a lack of recognition of other instances of impactful research. We suggest that more embedded opportunities for reporting impact-rich work will encourage scholars to create and sustain collaborations with non-academic partners.