

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 British Association for Applied Linguistics

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?
We support the proposal to use the REF2014 framework as a starting point, and to make changes in accordance with feedback and consultation responses.

Page 3: Unit of assessment structure

Q3. 2. What comments do you have about the unit of assessment structure in REF 2021?
Not all disciplines map straightforwardly onto sub-panels. Applied Linguistics is an example of this, with research being submitted across panels 4, 25, 27, 28, and 29 in REF2014. While it is sensible to retain, broadly, the structure of REF 2014 UoAs, we recommend that robust and transparent systems are in place for cross-referral and consultation among a pool of experts between panels, so that first and second readers of outputs are discipline experts (this did not happen for applied linguists in REF2014). This would ensure that truly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research is encouraged and fairly assessed – Applied Linguistics relates to disciplines including computer science, cultural studies, education, English and literature, healthcare, linguistics, neuroscience, politics, psychology, media studies, and sociology.

Page 4: Expert panels

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

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

No

Comments:

Sub-panel members should be involved from the outset in development of criteria. Applied Linguistics is an example of a discipline that submitted research across several sub-panels in REF2014, and there were discrepancies between panel membership and number of submissions. This was most acute in the Education sub-panel, which had no full panel member representing applied linguistics; when the panel later realised the extent of the applied linguistics research submitted, an output assessor was added, shared with the Modern Languages sub-panel, but this was late in the process. In order that representative discipline experts are appointed to panels from the outset, we ask that relevant learned societies' recommendations are attended to, and that appropriate evidence, including data from REF2014, is used to ensure better-informed predictions regarding the quantity of returns to each sub-panel.

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

Yes

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

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. In connection with the suggestion that HEIs might be included in the nomination process, we consider that this would only be appropriate if the invitation is extended to all UK HEIs. Further, we note that in some HEIs there is more than one Applied Linguistics unit, and these can be situated within a larger sections, such as 'Education', and it is essential that any HEI consultation connects with these units too, so that the problems highlighted in our response to q2 above are not exacerbated.

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

Comments:

We support the proposal for explicit and genuine attention to E&D in the appointment of panel members. Requests for information from learned societies and professional bodies should be practical; the task of collecting and collating detailed membership information may be beyond the resource of some associations, whereas a report of how E&D was taken into account when selecting nominees would not be. Furthermore, the membership of many associations extends beyond UK academia, so that the demographic of the entire membership does not map directly onto that of those members eligible for REF submission.

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

The list seems appropriate from our discipline's perspective.

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 do not support this proposal. HESA cost centres do not correspond directly with REF 2014 UOAs, and do not map straightforwardly onto academic units in universities, especially in the case of smaller (and sometimes cross-department and cross-faculty) disciplines such as Applied Linguistics.

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

The convolution of suggestions and proposals in paragraph 43 reflects the complexity and challenge of defining 'research-active' staff. If submissions of or near to 100% are to be required, robust definitions are essential. Consideration of the amount of contract time allocated to research, and a minimum length of contract running up to the submission date, would help to ensure that definitions of 'research active' are comparable across units and institutions.

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

This proposal seems reasonable.

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

A maximum of 6 would allow for a unit to be assessed on the work of one third of its members. A maximum of 4 (with an average of 2 per person) would ensure that around 50% of unit membership are included in the submission. We would favour the maximum number of outputs being reduced to 4.

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

We support the proposal of a minimum requirement of 1, along with a required average (of 2).

Special circumstances resulting in a reduced submission for individuals (on grounds of medical circumstance, parental leave, etc) should be addressed separately from these minimum/maximum /average requirements.

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?

We do not agree with the suggestion that 'acceptance for publication' is a suitable marker. Acceptance for publication can be difficult to pin down to a particular date; it can be obscured by negotiations and requests for amendments. Chronology of acceptance may not correlate with chronology of publication; a paper accepted later than another may be published earlier. Non portability would result in confusion and could subject individuals to undue pressure in negotiating contract dates etc.

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

n/a

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

Non-portability would impede potential for change, movement and growth in research units, and for dynamic alignments of researchers in institutional teams. It would negatively impact on early career researchers. The status of research published by post doctoral researchers in the transition from postgraduate study to first academic position, or during career breaks, or while employed on teaching contracts or fixed term consultancies, would be unclear/ineligible. It is hard to see how this could be mitigated.

We therefore strongly favour continuation of the policy of portability. A cut-off point near the submission date, after which portability is frozen, might mitigate last minute poaching, which can seriously disrupt preparation for REF.

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

Output sharing seems acceptable in principle, but we consider the application of it to be unfeasible in practice.

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

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

n/a

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

Any definition of research assistants should accommodate facts such as: research assistants attached to projects can temporarily increase the size of a small unit significantly; research assistants assigned to multidisciplinary projects can be difficult to situate in one UOA; there is no consistent expectation that a research assistant will independently produce research outputs.

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

The proposal relating to fractional contract staff, on 0.2FTE and above, is appropriate; evidence of engagement with the academic unit is essential and the requirement of a statement outlining the individual's connection to the unit will go some way towards providing this.

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

Collaboration and partnership between academia and practitioners is an important aspect of Applied Linguistics, and is embedded in the work of many researchers in our field. It is our view that staff mobility data would capture only a very small element of this collaboration, and would be misleading.

Outputs reporting work with non-academic bodies (e.g. language testing authorities, health authorities) were regarded as high-risk submissions to REF2014, because they did not map directly onto the criteria descriptors. This can discourage researchers from producing scholarly outputs in collaboration with practitioner partners, and can lead to further disconnect between theory and practice.

This move away from the production of collaborative outputs, together with the necessity in impact case studies to focus on long-term, relatively 'large' visible events clearly based on a specific body of research, means that there is no reward for more embedded collaboration, or for smaller scale activities that across a whole community can represent coherent, significant changes in behaviour and practice. Examples include: publishing outputs in more practitioner facing publications; presenting findings at a practitioner conference; seeking practitioners input into research design; working with practitioners on projects that are informed by research but not directly traceable to one piece of research; research-led training activities; deployment of follow-on/knowledge-transfer funding.

We strongly recommend that this kind of activity, appropriately documented, is accommodated within the REF2021 assessment criteria.

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?

Yes

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

Applied Linguistics research is typically interdisciplinary in nature, and as noted above (Q2) does not map straightforwardly onto sub-panels. Robust and transparent systems are needed for cross-referral and consultation among a pool of experts across panels, to ensure that first and second readers of outputs have appropriate expertise.

We support the proposal to assign interdisciplinary champions to UoAs.

We support the proposal that interdisciplinary identifiers are used consistently, with clear guidelines, across submissions. This would help to mitigate any narrowness of subject definition that results from risk aversion. We note that interdisciplinarity may be more accurately expressed on a scale rather than binary identifier. Outputs from large grants tend to be generated from interdisciplinary teams and do not align straightforwardly with UoA identities.

We would welcome the inclusion in the environment template of a section relating to support for interdisciplinary work.

Lastly, we find it problematic that replication research, comprehensive survey papers and metadata analyses – crucial to our discipline's relation to and contribution to practice – run the risk of scoring low against REF criterion of "originality", and are therefore less likely to be submitted. We would welcome steps to mitigate this, for example by mentioning syntheses and meta-analyses in the originality criterion descriptor (e.g. "Syntheses need to make an original contribution to a research agenda, providing innovative insights....").

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?

No

Comments:

As noted in our response to Q2 above, Applied Linguistics submissions are returned to a number of UOAs. Any sub-panel decision about the use of quantitative data must not discriminate against smaller discipline groups within that UOA. Metrics can favour later career researchers, and those working in large teams where papers have multiple authors, but individuals' contributions are small. Applied Linguistics is a relatively young and growing discipline, with a significant proportion of early career researchers, and a lot of outputs are by sole authors or very small teams. We are concerned that quantitative data, even where transparently applied, might present an indirect bias against research in this context.

Page 8: Impact

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

No

Comments:

Although there are clear benefits to general consistency of approach, especially at this very late stage in the REF cycle, we advocate a broader approach to assessment of impact than was applied in REF2014. We note that 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.

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

We support these recommendations, in particular those enhancing recognition of impact and engagement with non-academic users beyond that reported in the Impact Case Studies.

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

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

Clear definitions of these criteria would be helpful and result in more meaningful reporting.

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

Further guidance would be helpful and result in more meaningful submission of evidence.

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?

No

Comments:

Institutional support for the underlying research is not necessarily more salient than institutional support for subsequent engagement and impact-enabling events. It is challenging for an institution to report accurately and fully on an impact case, where the individual(s) who conducted the underpinning research (and possibly led on subsequent dissemination and engagement) has/have left, and are likely to be continuing the work elsewhere. Impact considerations are now integral elements of large, cross-institutional grants, and this does not sit comfortably with the institutional REF return system. Some flexibility enabling the impact of these projects to be represented appropriately across/between institutions would allow for more accurate and fair assessment. The case study approach to impact measures in the 2014 REF did not fully capture the iterative, non-finite, non-linear and (often) cross-institutional nature of impact. We suggest that more embedded opportunities for reporting impact-rich work will encourage scholars to create and sustain collaborations with non-academic partners.

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

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?

We are in favour of reducing the minimum number of case studies from two to one for smaller units.

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

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

We feel that inclusion of fields that are not intended for use in the assessment process would not help transparency of process, and may confuse.

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?

We are in favour of this approach, which recognises that research activity can be multifaceted, and is not necessarily appropriately represented by single outputs.

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

Yes

Comments:

If there is to be a time frame for underpinning research activity, then this twenty-year window appears reasonable. However, the start date seems arbitrary, and suggests a time frame without clear justification; there are scenarios where this start date could be irrelevant. We suggest that the timing of the underpinning research activity in any particular case should be criteria-based. The important considerations are: 1) the impact activity itself must be based on some good research 2) the impact activity reported must have happened in the REF period 3) if the underpinning research has previously been used in an impact case study, there is criteria-based justification for using it again. This would facilitate the avoidance of double counting, but also make it possible to capitalise on potential impact from earlier research activity. For example, new technology or new social/environmental imperatives can render older research impactful.

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?

While we broadly support the proposal for underpinning research to be assessed against threshold criteria relating to rigour, we are concerned that managing such an assessment entails identifying rigour as a discrete measure, and evaluating it against the context within which the research was produced (i.e. without benefits from hindsight). We believe that a case could also be made for originality as a key component of underpinning research. We therefore do not consider there to be a clear case for basing eligibility for underpinning research solely on an assessment of rigour.

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

We consider that the increased burden on institutions and panels would be considerable, and that the challenge for panels of teasing apart audit evidence from impact quality would be considerable.

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

If quantitative data are to be used, such guidelines would be necessary in order to support fair assessment across cases, and across UoAs. There is a case for making guidelines UoA-specific, in view of the fact that metrics play differently in different disciplines.

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

We have no further comments on this.

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?

We are broadly in favour of this as a means of capturing the iterative, non-finite nature of research impact. However, evidence of additionality should be required, and assessment rules should accommodate both kinds of case: impact from cases reported in 2014 and new impact cases (which necessitate evidence that underpinning research meets any threshold criteria).

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

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

Our suggestions are under two headings: staffing profiles and research support.

Staffing profiles: number and proportions of staff on different contract types (teaching only, research only, teaching and research, parttime, fulltime, fixed term, permanent), within a specific time frame (e.g. the 2-3 years leading up to submission).

Research support: research leave granted (number of staff and number of months), to be considered alongside the amount of research time built into people's workloads; internal research support funding (priming funds etc.) per FTE; research mentoring schemes, including uptake, and recognition in workload; research training within the unit.

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?

In our discipline, direct collaboration with practitioners enriches the research environment considerably. Recognition of joint activities, advisory roles, etc. would recognise this. We are in favour of enabling the reporting of impact beyond the ICS framework, and the environment element might offer a suitable framework for that.

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

Comments:

We consider it important to distinguish between open access reports, open materials and open data. In our view it is appropriate to give credit for open access data and materials. In terms of outputs reporting research, we note that this proposal benefits RCUK funded projects (where Universities must honour outputs as open access). However, those without dedicated funding find it harder to publish open access. Furthermore, such a reward system would have unintended outcomes, where for example extra credit for open access could result in lower quality research outputs being given the same/similar recognition as higher quality research. We note that it is rather late in the REF cycle to make significant changes to rules around open access. In particular, the need for a priori ethics approval might restrict capacity to make data sets open access. The promotion of open access reports should come as a carrot, early in the process (of funding and publication), not as a stick.

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

We are in favour of incentivising open access to research data sets. This could be promoted by providing extra credits for open access data sets, and/or by making open access a criterion for rigour: there is good evidence that methodological transparency improves research quality. We note though, that in some cases open access to data is not appropriate (e.g. sensitive data where permission was not given), and researchers should not be penalised for restricting access in these cases.

We support the proposal to maintain eligibility of databases and data sets as outputs. A corollary to this is ensuring that an assessment of "world class in quality" is achievable when existing data sets are used, as well as when new data is generated.

Page 10: Institutional level assessment

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

We have no specific comment on this from our disciplinary perspective. However, Applied Linguistics is interdisciplinary in nature, and therefore we favour initiatives that support institutional infrastructures for interdisciplinary working.

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

It would be fitting to consider funding and infrastructures that support interdisciplinary research.

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 have no comment to make on this proposal.

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:

It would seem sensible, at this stage, not to stray far from REF 2014 weighting allocations. However, we strongly support the inclusion of broader indicators of impact, and therefore propose that the ICSs do not account for the full impact weighting, but that a proportion of this is assigned to the assessment other impact activities.

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

Comments:

We have no comment to make on this proposal.

Page 12: Proposed timetable for REF 2021

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

The proposed timetable seems reasonable, though the fact that publication of initial decisions (mid-2017) and guidelines (2018) is happening so far through the REF cycle is not ideal.

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?

n/a

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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