

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

Linguistics Association of Great Britain

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 are in favour of a broad continuity of approach. The REF has a substantial 'backwash' effect on institutions' practice, and changes take a long time and substantial resource to implement.

Page 3: Unit of assessment structure

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

We suggest that HEFCE considers a panel structure where language sciences are brought together in a single panel. Linguistics work was submitted across a wide range of sub-panels and panels in REF2014, so that an overall view of the intellectual health and contribution of work on language is not available. However, if the current panel structure is to be maintained, the flexibility of cross-referral and cross-panel consultation need to be strengthened and, as in REF2014, the name of the sub-panel 'Modern Languages and Linguistics' must again include the word 'Linguistics'. Again, if the current panel structure is maintained, we think it important to allow multiple submissions to single sub-panels where institutions may have quite distinct research cultures (for example, Linguistics and Modern Languages, where work on the former can be mathematical, computational, experimental and/or quantitative, while work on the latter is primarily literary and cultural).

Page 4: Expert panels

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

No

Comments:

We strongly disagree with the proposal to finalise panel criteria before sub-panel members are appointed. It is essential to involve sub-panel members in the setting of criteria, to ensure that particular discipline concerns are taken into account. These preliminary meetings of the sub-panels also act as important induction, preparation and training for sub-panel members. To develop criteria in advance would lead to a loss of confidence in the REF process.

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

No

Comments:

No, for the reasons set out under 3a.

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

Yes

Comments:

The proposals appear appropriate. We note that the main issue seems to be in providing a sufficient pool of nominees for the selection panels to select from, and efforts to encourage nomination of a larger pool of candidates are needed.

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

We agree that Learned Societies should be the main source of nominations for sub-panel members.

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

Yes

Comments:

We agree that equality and diversity information should be requested.

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

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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 strongly disagree with the proposal to allocate staff based on HESA cost centres. This is an issue of particular relevance to researchers in Linguistics. In any one institution, Linguists may be found in up to six different HESA cost centres. Institutions may choose to submit individuals to one or to several REF sub-panels, not necessarily based on HESA mapping. This may occasionally be 'game-playing', but mostly decisions are taken on justifiable grounds relating to research fit, unit size and so on. It's a demonstrable fact that HESA contracts don't necessarily reflect research activity. HEIs need to be free to maintain flexibility in how they associate individuals with submissions.

There is no single HESA cost centre to which linguistics can be reliably assigned. Research at different institutions in Linguistics in REF2014 was assessed under (at least) the following:

104 Psychology & behavioural sciences
125 Area studies
135 Education
137 Modern languages
138 English language & literature
145 Media studies

HEI work on allocation of staff to UOAs was not the most burdensome aspect of preparation for REF2014 and this task can thus safely be retained.

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

We do not object to the proposals.

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

We support an approach which maintains the overall number of outputs submitted at roughly the level of REF2014 and avoids the need to introduce a sampling approach which could adversely affect smaller units.

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

We regard the average of 2 per person as acceptable but a maximum of 6 outputs per person as too high, with 4 or 5 a better number.

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

We support setting a minimum of 1 per staff member so as to avoid de facto non-submission of some staff members. Setting a minimum of 1 may also automatically reduce the upper limit that can be submitted from any one person in most UOAs.

We note that staff with special circumstances in REF2014 had to submit a minimum of 1 output, so a minimum of 1 in REF2020 would be the most consistent approach. We would recommend, though, the retention of special circumstances, for example for parental leave, extended medical leave, and ECR status.

The REF Manager's report suggests decoupling of staff and outputs would reduce "complexities [...] relating to multi-authored papers". If a minimum of 1 is set these complexities remain. If a minimum of 1 is set then we thus recommend that co-authored papers could count for both authors in terms of meeting the minimum.

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 often not a reliably verifiable date, especially in the case of monographs. Date of publication is the most objective measure.

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

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

We see disadvantages in non-portability which are equal to the disadvantages of portability. Institutions will be incentivized to game playing (as will individuals) in either case. However, non-portability raises new complex issues of where research is attributed, and has a potential negative impact on ECRs. On balance, we recommend maintaining portability. Non-portability is particularly problematic for ECRs, individuals re-entering FT employment, and for individuals seeking to move across national boundaries. It is also problematic for individuals whose institutions have made them redundant. Mitigation would require very complex rules; the best mitigation is simply to retain portability at least for these groups.

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

We cannot see how output sharing could realistically be made to work, given the impossibility of determining exactly what amount of the submitted research should be attributed to which institution.

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:
We support this.

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

We have no comment on this proposal.

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

We have no comment.

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

We broadly support the retention of the 0.2FTE requirement, but note that there should be a requirement to demonstrate genuine engagement of the researcher with the HEI.

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?

Linguistics is a discipline with equal strength in theory, where non-academic impact may be limited, and application, where collaboration between academic and outside organisations is important. We therefore have two complementary points to make. Firstly, the increasing emphasis on collaboration needs to be regarded with some caution and not be allowed to threaten theoretical research. Secondly, in those cases where collaborations are appropriate and highly valuable, the effort required to maintain them must be recognised and factored into requirements relating to outputs.

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

Comments:
We support this proposal.

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

As our research is frequently interdisciplinary in nature, we regard this as an important issue. Interdisciplinarity should be borne in mind when sub-panels are constituted, and when their working practices are determined, in particular considering how sub-panels should consult and handle cross-referral. We believe that cross-referral was largely effective in REF2014 and an overt structure for managing this is welcome if it will ensure that it is fully resourced.

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:

We regard quantitative data to be acceptable only when it is considered appropriate for all sub-groups within a submission to a sub-panel and when it does not discriminate against other sub-groups. Modern Languages and Linguistics do not constitute a 'discipline', and it is important that HEFCE recognizes this for sub-panels to work effectively.

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:

We agree with this proposal, though we have comments to make on the number of case studies required (see below).

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

We are in favour of the recommendation.

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?

We agree with the proposal and are in favour of the proposed definitions.

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

We regard the criteria of reach and significance as appropriate, though we note that clearer definitions of each would be useful. These should also be fleshed out for the relevant discipline within panel criteria/guidance, not just stated at overall level.

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

We would welcome further guidance on public engagement impacts, particularly a discussion of and advice on what would remain ineligible. One issue on which guidance would be particularly useful would be public engagement that is related to overall expertise but not specific research.

We support maintaining explicit inclusion of public engagement work on endangered languages and with the communities that speak them. We note that a larger number of public engagement impact case studies were submitted under Panel D in REF2014 and recommend that the experience of Panel D in assessing these, and criteria set by that panel, should be used to inform decisions regarding inclusion of public engagement impacts.

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 this is a difficult issue, especially where an impact case study relies on one individual, where portability of impact as well as outputs might be considered fair. Overall, though, we would support maintenance of the 2014 system in 2021, if only because a radical change at this stage would be detrimental. Further discussion for post-2021 could be undertaken; if so, this should be done well in advance.

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:

We agree with this proposal. Additional space must be provided within the revised environment template for enough detail to be given.

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 recommend reducing the required minimum number of case studies as the 2014 requirement was detrimental to small departments. If institutional case studies are required, it is important that these should also count for the UOA in which they originate, so as to avoid conflict between the needs of the institution and the individual UOA. Case studies spanning more than one UOA (but not 'institutional') should be permitted, as they were in REF2014; this is of particular importance in our discipline which spans different panels/HESA cost centres as noted under Q7.

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:

We agree with this proposal.

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

Information about RCUK funding of underpinning research can be collected for reporting purposes, but should not be made available to sub-panels, to avoid influencing assessment decisions.

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 broadly in favour of such an approach, provided any exclusions are made clear.

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

Yes

Comments:

We agree with this proposal.

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?

In the fields we represent, separating rigour from other criteria is difficult. As far as we are aware, impact case studies were rarely rejected because of the quality of the underlying research, although institutions may have operated an over-strict selection policy in some areas. In sum, it is unlikely that specifying a 2* overall standard or a 2* standard for rigour only would have a substantial effect on our discipline.

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

We regard the proposal to provide audit evidence as unnecessarily cumbersome.

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

Guidelines for the use of data would be beneficial. We note however that 'standardised' measures such as QALYs are very rarely applicable in our discipline, and we do not see a viable measurable alternative. Qualitative evidence must remain acceptable in support of case studies.

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

No.

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 regard it as advantageous to permit submission of impact case studies that build on and develop impact case studies submitted in 2014, provided new activity can be demonstrated. This reflects the fact that really effective impact is on-going and strengthens over time.

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:

We agree with this proposal. We suggest as possible additional data: proportion of staff on teaching-only contracts; proportion of staff awarded study leave in a given period, and length of leave awarded.

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

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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?

Inclusion within the environment template of support for/enabling of impact should allow for this.

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

No

Comments:

There is a risk that this would bias against disciplines which publish primarily in monographs/edited volumes, for which OA is not yet established. Linguistics is a discipline in which theoretical advances (generally published in journals) rely on a good supply of descriptive data (which is proportionally more likely to be published in monographs than journal articles).

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

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Page 10: Institutional level assessment

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

As noted above, requiring a certain % of institutional case studies risks creating unhelpful competition between the institution and individual UOAs.

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

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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?

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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

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:

As noted above, requiring a certain % of institutional case studies risks creating unhelpful competition between the institution and individual UOAs.

Page 12: Proposed timetable for REF 2021

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

Guidance regarding key decisions - such as non-portability and deciding which staff must be submitted - should be provided as soon as possible.

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?

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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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