

RESPONSE TO HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND CONSULTATION

RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK SECOND CONSULTATION ON THE ASSESSMENT AND FUNDING OF RESEARCH

Summary

The Environment Agency welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) consultation on the proposals for the Research Excellence Framework.

- Overall, we support the proposals for the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and in particular the assessment of Research Impact. As an end-user of research, the Environment Agency values the work of the UK academic community, and the proposals will help to recognise the work they do for us and other public bodies.
- We support the greater emphasis on Research Impact, and suggest that the weighting for this element should be no lower than 25%. Input from end-users will be needed to assess Research Impact, and this will have resource implications for end-user organisations. For the Environment Agency to commit staff time to this initiative, we need to be confident that we are participating in a process that will improve substantially the engagement between researchers and policy-makers/regulators.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Environment Agency is increasingly accessing advice and research evidence from UK universities. Access to this expertise will become even more important as greater efficiency is required of us while at the same time we need to provide compelling evidence to underpin our Corporate Strategy.
- 1.2 We believe that the REF proposals will recognise the contribution that UK universities already make to our work. It will also provide the incentive needed to ensure that UK public policy is developed with input from leading researchers. This is also the collective view of the Environmental Research Funders Forum, of which the Environment Agency is a member.

2.0 ENVIRONMENT AGENCY ANSWERS TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

2.1 Please note we have only responded to those questions that are of particular relevance to the Environment Agency.

Question 1: Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF?

2.2 We are broadly in agreement with the proposals for the REF, but we specifically welcome the inclusion of Impact as one of the characteristics of research excellence.

Question 2: What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing outputs?

2.3 The Environment Agency is primarily an end-user of applied research so we welcome the inclusion of applied research as being eligible for submission. We also welcome the inclusion of “grey literature and outputs that are not in conventional published form, such as confidential reports to government or business...” (Para 38). We recommend that this should include the project reports from commissioned research.

Question 3: What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing impact?

2.4 We believe the assessment of Research Impact has to represent the variety of ways in which we as end-users work with leading experts. For example, the Environment Agency has convened two Expert Review Groups to advise on our own research programmes. Academic researchers are a key component of these groups and they advise on the current state of knowledge, the potential gaps and future opportunities. The emphasis is less on individual pieces of work and more on the depth of knowledge that the advisors can bring to an issue. Their advice has a significant impact on our research priorities. We believe the assessment of Impact should recognise this type of activity. Within the draft REF, the policy section of the ‘common menu’ of impact indicators contains some indicators that could cover this, e.g. “Participation on public policy/advisory committees”. However, it is not clear if this applies to statutory committees only, or whether participation in ad hoc advisory groups would be included within its scope. If the latter is the case, we believe this will encourage engagement and increase the value that research has to policy/regulation.

2.5 We would like to see ‘the environment’ in the definition of impacts (paragraph 53b). It may be implied in ‘public policy’ but we believe it should be explicit.

2.6 We believe research users will be key to the assessment of Research Impact. Panel members who are end-users will be able to assess impact across a range of subjects. The challenge for HEFCE will be ensuring that each panel has adequate representation of end-users so that the decisions are informed by actual experience and to ensure the end-user is not a ‘lone voice’ on a

panel. For the Environment Agency to commit an individual's time to participate on an REF panel, we will have to be reassured that the REF will have a positive impact on the UK research community and stimulate better engagement and value to policy.

Question 4: Do you have any comments on the proposed approach to assessing research environment?

- 2.7 We welcome the approach to assessing the Research Environment, in particular "Engagement". The proposals recognise that the provision of advice and the interpretation of research findings is a vital part of the translation of research to make it accessible to end-users.
- 2.8 We note that "Participation on government advisory panels" (point 79, second bullet) is similar to "Participation on public policy/advisory committees" in the draft list of common impact indicators. Many aspects of what contributes to the impact of excellent research are to be found in "Research Environment". We believe there is potential here for overlap or possible double counting.

Question 5: Do you agree with our proposals for combining and weighting the output, impact and environment sub profiles?

- 2.9 We agree with the proposals for combining and weighting the Research Output, Impact and Environment sub profiles. We would encourage HEFCE to resist any pressure to reduce the impact weighting, as we believe that doing so would devalue the assessment from a user perspective. If the Impact weighting is reduced there is the risk that end-users will see no value in participating in the assessment panels because their contribution to the overall assessment will not be significant. We believe that in setting the weighting at 25% HEFCE are sending a clear message that this assessment is not 'business as usual' and are giving Universities the opportunity to demonstrate an awareness of the potential of their research.
- 2.10 We believe that if the Impact weighting were to be reduced, the weighting for Research Environment should be increased with the emphasis on the provision of advice and end-user engagement.

Question 6: What comments do you have on the panel configuration proposed at Annexe E?

- 2.11 We believe the separation of Environmental Science and Environmental Studies across two panels is potentially problematic (Annexe E, 3b). Environmental issues are complex and interdisciplinary in nature, requiring knowledge from both natural and social sciences to inform management and policy decisions. The proposed separation could create barriers that discourage innovative, policy and end-user relevant research. We would recommend that this separation is avoided to ensure that interdisciplinary research between the social and natural sciences is properly assessed. This will also be more efficient in terms of the staff time committed to sitting on assessment panels.

Question 9: Do you agree that our proposed approach will ensure that interdisciplinary research is assessed on an equal footing with other types of research?

- 2.12 It is encouraging that HEFCE will be building on experiences gained during the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (Para 105). Given our response to Question 6 above, we are keen to ensure interdisciplinary environmental research gets due recognition in the REF. Excellence for single discipline research differs from excellence for interdisciplinary and applied research. We believe that panels will need to be clear about what it means and will have to include members with experience of interdisciplinary working to ensure more traditional single-subject viewpoints do not dominate the assessment.

3.0 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 The Environment Agency is encouraged by the proposal for the REF as we believe that it will act as an incentive for more engagement between leading researchers and end-users such as the Environment Agency.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information or background to this response can be obtained from Neil Veitch Senior Scientist, Partnerships, Evidence Directorate either by telephone on 0117 9142981 or by e-mail at neil.veitch@environment-agency.gov.uk

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