



British Philosophical Association

## British Philosophical Association

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Dear Dr Sweeney

We are writing to you on behalf of the two subject associations we represent – the British Philosophical Association and the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies – concerning the proposal to merge units of assessment in the REF.

HEFCE is proposing to merge the two RAE units of assessment in our subject areas – Philosophy, and Theology, Divinity and Religious Studies – into one panel (Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies: PTR). We are extremely concerned about the effects that this will have on whole institutions, individual departments (or 'research units'), and postgraduate recruitment. (In fact, we have no objection in principle to having a merged panel; our concern is with the implication that Philosophy and TRS departments will have to make joint submissions, resulting in a single outcome across both disciplines.)

Before outlining our concerns about these effects, we would like to make it clear that counting PTR as a single UoA would run directly counter to HEFCE's description of UoAs as 'coherent research disciplines' (Consultation Document, §87). There is, quite simply, no such research discipline encompassing Philosophy and TRS, and there has not been one since the Enlightenment. There is some overlap between the research of some philosophers and some theologians; but no more than there is between any two disciplines that have overlapping concerns.

We would like, however, to focus on the practical implications of the proposed merger.

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**Whole institutions:** One of the listed 'key features' of the REF is that UoAs are 'at a level of detail that is useful ... for providing research management information to institutions' (§27d). This aim is undermined by the proposed merger. Philosophy and T&R rarely co-exist within the same school (although of course they do in a few exceptional cases), and often do not even co-exist in the same faculty; they do not, in short, constitute a 'level at which research is primarily managed' (§27f). A single REF result that averaged over what are, in the vast majority of UK universities, two unrelated administrative units would therefore be utterly unhelpful for institutional research management purposes. It would be virtually impossible to distinguish between, say, two averagely-performing departments on the one hand, and one stronger and one weaker department on the other. It would therefore be impossible to distribute resources fairly, or to identify potential areas of investment or disinvestment. Of course, universities have other information at their disposal on the basis of which to make such decisions; however, RAE scores are the most rigorous, objective and fair measures of research quality that are available, and the loss of this information at the level of genuinely coherent research units (that is, in most cases, at the level of individual departments) could have catastrophic results.

**Departments:** The proposed merger would inevitably increase the workload on departments in the run-up to the REF, by requiring distinct units with, in most cases, no areas of overlap in activity to come up with a single research 'narrative'. Further, as we said above, the loss of rigorous and objective information about the research performance of individual units may well result in poor decision-making at institutional level, which may in turn directly affect the research quality of high-performing departments whose REF scores are merged with those of weaker departments.

**Postgraduate recruitment:** There is strong evidence that prospective postgraduate research students have used RAE 'league tables' as a measure of the prestige and research environment of departments they are considering applying to. Again, merging the two panels into one will, at best, render league tables completely useless from the point of view of prospective PhD students. At worst – for those prospective students who do not fully understand how the REF works – the league tables will, in many cases, be utterly misleading, giving the impression that a given department is stronger or weaker than it really is because its position is determined in large part by the performance of another, completely unrelated department.

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We therefore urge you to reconsider the merging of panels, and specifically the suggestion that Philosophy and Theology & Religious Studies will be considered as single UoAs with a combined REF outcome. It is only by doing this that HEFCE can meet its own aims of assessing 'coherent research units' and providing information 'at a level of detail that is useful ... for providing research management information to institutions'.

Yours sincerely

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