



British Philosophical Association

BPA / REF 2021 CONSULTATION
MEETING FOR HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS &
RESEARCH LEADS IN PHILOSOPHY
Friday 14th September 2018
Bush House, KCL

Present:

Bob Stern (Sheffield / REF Philosophy sub-panel Chair), Bill Child (Oxford, REF sub-panel member), Heather Widdows (Birmingham, REF sub-panel member), Joe Morrison (QUB, BPA).

Dan Watts (Essex), John Lippitt (Herts.), Manuel Dries (Open), Greg Currie (York), Fiona Macpherson (Glasgow), John Callanan (KCL), Nikk Effingham (Birmingham), Jon Williamson (Kent), Robert Northcott (Birkbeck), Tina Röck (Dundee), Nick Zangwill (Hull), Robin Hendry (Durham), Daniel Whiting (Southampton), Jussi Suikkanen (Birmingham), Pekka Väyrynen (Leeds), Katherine Hawley (St. Andrews), Alison Hills (Oxford), Stella Sandford (Kingston), Meena Dhanda (Wolverhampton).

Purpose of meeting:

1. To brief Philosophy departments on REF2021, and consider any concerns
2. To draft response to REF2021 consultation on the draft 'Panel Criteria and Working Methods' [PCWM] and 'Guidance on Submissions' [GS] documents

1. General Briefing

BS presented an outline of REF2021 using a powerpoint (to be distributed with this document), which also set out the changes from REF2014, and feedback from the REF2014 panel which may be useful in preparing for REF2021.

The following issues were raised in discussion:

Submissions

Question 1a: In the case of multiple co-authorship, is it a risk for a UoA to enter an output that was written with a large number of co-authors?

Reply: It is acceptable, and is not a risk as such, but (as with the sciences) unless it is clear that the submitting author has made a substantial contribution (e.g. listed as main author), the sub-panel may well ask for the output to be audited, to check whether there is enough of a substantial research contribution from the person who is submitting the output (see PCWM §219).

Question 1b: We notice other Main Panels dealing with work with multiple authors request a statement explaining the contribution of the author who is submitting the output: wouldn't this be sensible for Main Panel D too, as papers in philosophy can have many authors too (examples of ten authors were mentioned, for example in interdisciplinary papers with the sciences).

Reply: It may be right that Panel D was working with the assumption that work would only have two or three authors, so we will raise this in the consultation – see below.

Question 2: How should we understand the guidance around situations where there might be two (or more) co-authors in the same UoA? Is it possible for both of these people to enter one and the same output as part of the same UoA's submission?

Reply: This issue is raised as part of the consultation process – see below.

Question 3a: You've said that double-weighting was well-handled last time, and that it is really not a huge risk for UoAs double-weight relevant outputs, and that in REF2014 there were some outputs that could have been (and perhaps should have been) double-weighted but were not. You've said that a monograph seems like it should qualify for double-weighting – that the norm for something that merited double-weighting would be a book.

Reply: Yes, see PCWM §236. But note that while research monographs will generally be good candidates for double-weighting, care should be taken over texts that include a mixture of research and more introductory material (e.g. guidebooks), where the research material may only merit single weighting.

Question 3b: What other things might be considered as candidates for double-weighted outputs?

Reply: We can imagine an article that spans multiple issues of a journal could get double-weighted – again see PCWM §236.

Question 4a: How should we think about the use of the 300 word statement box that can accompany research outputs?

Reply: For the vast majority of outputs we are not expecting there to be a need to write a statement, since the output normally explains its own research credentials. A less obvious case might be e.g. a guidebook (for example Routledge guidebooks) that you are hoping to include: this may contain original research, but also elements closer to a textbook. In this sort of case, you might want to use the 300 word statement to highlight and draw attention to its research contributions, and therefore perhaps specifying particular chapters for assessment, and not others. However, we would anticipate this type of submission would be rare as such works standardly offer a comprehensive overview of an area; while publications which synthesize and clarify positions are important philosophical work, they tend not to score highly on the REF criteria of originality and significance. Other types of work where a statement might be useful are translations and scholarly editions, to explain the nature of the research contribution.

Question 4b: But if a 300 word statement is used, won't this suggest that the output is problematic in some way, and prejudice the sub-panel against it?

Reply: The decision to include the 300 word statement is not to be taken as evidence that the output is problematic. We accept this statement can be perfectly appropriate, as in the cases above, so that the use of the statement will not prejudice our judgement of the output.

Question 5: The feedback from REF2014 states: "Nearly all requests for double-weighting were approved. Most accepted requests were for single authored monographs. Double-weighted outputs formed a small promotion of total outputs (5%), and were much more frequently judged to be of world-leading quality than single-weighted outputs." What is the explanation for the latter fact?

Reply: All things being equal, it is easier to develop a more ambitious and elaborated position in a book than an article, given the extra scope and space this affords. Last time the sub-panel noted this correlation between monographs and higher stars and wished to ensure this was feedback to the sector for individuals planning their research and for institutions when submitted and requesting double-weighting.

Question 6: Does place of publication matter?

Reply: The feedback from REF2014 philosophy panel says "outputs were scored entirely on the merits of their content and without regard to perceived prestige rankings of journals or other external indicators of quality", and the same approach will be adopted in REF2021. Place of publication is therefore not an issue.

Question 7: How does the panel treat philosophy submissions that are being cross-referred from other sub-panels – how will they regard such work? The concern is that it might be treated differently from other philosophy submissions.

Reply: Such work will be treated exactly like any other philosophy submission.

Question 8: What are the new rules concerning 0.2 appointments, and how will they prevent gameplaying?

Reply: Under the rules for REF2021, the UoA has to make clear how there is a substantive connection by which the 0.2 appointment is actively contributing to the research life of the UoA (see GS §123). But also note that there has to be a substantive connection for all other researchers, including those with fractional contracts of more than 0.2. A difference between 0.2 appointments and others in the UoA is that this connection has to be stated in advance as part of the submission, but in principle everyone else could be audited to check that they have a substantive research connection.

Question 9: How will interdisciplinary work be handled in REF2021?

Reply: There has been an effort to engage more effectively with interdisciplinary work in REF2021, with various new measures in place, such as designated interdisciplinary advisors on sub-panels, and the new Interdisciplinary Advisory Panel (see GS §§103-105). However, there are still some issues that are not clear, such as whether there will be consultation between sub-panels on interdisciplinary outputs. It was agreed that in the consultation, we should ask for more work and clarity around how interdisciplinary outputs will be handled (see below). Irrespective of what mechanisms are put in place the Philosophy sub-panel encourages the submission of interdisciplinary work which falls in whole or in part within the UOA descriptor. The 2021 sub-panel will follow the practice of the 2014 panel and look for REF excellence in every output

Question 10: If someone is in a small department that cannot be submitted to REF because it does not have enough staff, can a person be submitted by another UoA? If so, can this person still submit their work to the Philosophy sub-panel?

Reply: Yes, a person in a small Philosophy department can be submitted by another UoA, and can request to have their work cross-referred to the Philosophy sub-panel (see PCWM §388). The same process can be used by anyone working in philosophy who is not in a Philosophy department.

Question 11: Would a big online archive or database could count as an output? And how are they to be submitted? Is it possible to submit a website address (a URL) as an output? It doesn't appear in the annex for output types, i.e. there is no "website" listed there.

Reply: Any research output that is in the public domain is open for submission. Perhaps in this instance, though, it might count as an archive (which is listed in the annex for output types)? If you are considering submitting an output of this sort, it is worth consulting with the REF team prior to submission.

Impact

Question 12a: Regarding impact, how close does the connection have to be between research and impact, particularly when it comes to public engagement? For example, in speaking to a school, it would not usually be possible to talk about the specifics of your research as such, so does that make it ineligible for impact?

Reply: The feedback from REF2014 states: "The sub-panel agreed that valuable impact can occur when the contribution made by a researcher arises from their general expertise as a researcher in the field rather than being generated by specific instances of their cutting-edge research". This is the approach that will also be taken in REF2021. So, in the case of the example above, if it is because you an expert in the field that you are talking at the school, and you are using that expertise to make general points about the topic, and this expertise can be demonstrated through your research, then this is an adequate connection for public engagement of this sort: you would not be expected to be presenting your specific views or ideas.

Question 12b: But §318c of GS for REF2021 states: "Impacts on, for example, public awareness, attitudes, understanding or behaviour that arose from engaging the public with research. In these cases, the submitting unit must show that the engagement activity was, at least in part, based on the submitted unit's research and drew materially and distinctly upon it." The phrase "draw

materially” seems to suggest that research itself has to be presented, contrary to the guidance above?

Reply: BS reported that he had sought clarification from Dinah Birch on this, as Chair of the Main Panel D, and she had confirmed that the approach suggested in the REF2014 feedback was what was intended (as in the guidance above), so that this section of the document for REF2021 may have to be re-drafted to make this clearer. This issue will therefore be mentioned in the consultation – see below.

Question 13: Will it be possible to make a written statement which explains how the ‘underpinning research’ is linked to the impact case study?

Reply: Like last time, there is an expectation that the impact case study explains how the impact connects to the underpinning research. That this is required is explicitly stated in the proposed 2021 template.

Question 14: There seem to be issues with the new thresholds for the number of case studies in relation to staff numbers: (a) Small units are required to submit the same number of case studies as medium sized units of up to 19 staff, which puts these smaller units at a disadvantage (b) There is a disincentive on units close to the impact threshold to hire new staff, as if they go to the next level, more case studies will be required, with the effect that impact considerations are undermining the growth of departments, and thus their research development and environment.

Reply: It was agreed that both these points raise serious concerns, and should be reflected in the response to the consultation question on impact below.

Environment

Question 15: How will the institutional level statement on environment be used?

Reply: We recognize that there is some unclarity around the role of the institutional level statement about environment. We (the community and the sub-panel) are still unclear on how it is going to be used. We know that it is not going to be used for the scoring of the UoA, but we do not know how it is going to be used beyond that. We recognize that the language around this is also not very helpful, with talk of this being a ‘pilot study’ – for what purpose? This issue will be raised in the consultation – see below.

Question 16: Should PGR placement in academic positions be discussed in the environment statement, as feedback from REF2014 notes that this was useful to the sub-panel?

Reply: While providing such information is not mandatory, in the right context it can provide a useful indicator of the health of the environment for graduate community (as can non-academic placement), and of the UoA’s ‘contribution to the . . . sustainability of the wider discipline or research base’.

Question 17a: For smaller units, how can they do as well on environment as larger units?

Reply: The panel recognises that the research environments are very different from those at larger UoAs, and smaller UoAs are assessed with this in mind. What the panel are looking for is evidence that, given the resources that are available to such UoAs, they are making the best and most effective use of them.

Question 18: PCWM §351 says that “Main Panel D would prefer to see section 4 of the template constructed as a narrative rather than a series of lists”. How is this best handled?

Reply: An appropriate strategy is to be specific when building a narrative. For instance, make some general claims about the recognition or wider influence of staff in the UoA, and then provide several specific examples to back it up.

Question 19: It would be very useful to have a clear statement from the panel about the sustainability of small philosophy departments, and how many people are required in order to make a UoA Philosophy submission.

Reply: As a sub-panel, we have no preconceived ideas about UOA size or shape and we will evaluate environment templates on a case-by-case basis.

2. Discussions specifically addressing the consultation questions

In both documents, it was agreed to 'agree' that the guidance provided is clear, so the responses below only relate to the specific questions that are posed for discussion.

A. Draft Guidance on Submission

Consultation question 4

This question concerns who should count as a researcher for the purpose of REF2021. BS explained that in the view of the sub-panel, the bar for inclusion should be set pretty high, so that those included in REF are not just Research Assistants; it is important that each individual has to be conducting their own independent research project. One reason is that including such people will increase the number of people in a UoA, which then has a knock-on effect for impact case studies, as it may push UoAs over the next threshold of case studies required. Another reason is that having a high bar for inclusion will protect early career academics from pressure, while making it more likely that they will not be discriminated against as universities become risk averse and only appoint new staff who can immediately contribute to the REF return.

Discussion: One problem case raised concerned postdocs who are part of a larger project but who may have quite a lot of independence, such as a Marie Curie funded Co-Investigator. The guidelines seem difficult to parse here, since in one important sense they are not pursuing their own independent research project.

Response to consultation: It was agreed that we would ask for a clear statement from the REF panel on whether MC fellows should be considered independent and added to the list of fellowships which are standardly assumed to be such.

Consultation question 5

Not applicable.

Consultation question 6a

Agreed.

Consultation question 7

This question concerns special staff circumstances, and is more of an issue with REF2021 than for REF2014. In REF2014, it was possible to make a submission where an individual could have a reduced number of outputs if they had been away from work due to maternity / paternity / other circumstances. However, REF2021 has broken the link between individual circumstances and outputs. There is therefore no direct reduction available to individuals, unless circumstances are so bad that they can claim exemption from having to submit outputs altogether. Originally, it was envisaged that the unit would be able to make adjustments to the pattern of outputs that they submit in other ways, i.e. by requiring the minimum submission from every researcher, and then making up the total number of submissions from the whole UoA while relieving the burden on individuals facing particular circumstances.

Nonetheless, there had been a call to find some way to reduce demands on staff with special circumstances, and thus this draft document proposes a tariff system. However, reductions cannot be passed directly to the staff concerned, as the link between individuals and outputs no longer exists, and so will just apply to the UoA as a whole, which means that in it is in the UoAs discretion whether or not to pass this reduction on to the staff concerned. UoAs will be expected to comment in their environment statement on how they handle these issues, but that may be considered a rather weak sanction. The question is therefore how else could this be handled, given that there is no direct link between outputs and individuals? Should the criteria include more measures to enforce the idea that the tariff reduction has to provide relief to individuals in question, for example by penalising UoAs that do not do so?

The group therefore discussed the two main options:

1. Remove tariff reductions, return to a strong obligation to make UoAs handle this process internally and insist that they write a statement explaining how they provided appropriate relief in situations involving individual staff circumstances
2. Employ the tariff reduction system and hope that UoAs are honourable and pass the output reduction on to the individuals concerned

On balance, it was agreed that the second option was the 'least bad' alternative, and that the responses to this consultation question should therefore be:

7a: 'Agree'

Comment: While the lack of a direct link between the tariff reductions and the staff concerned may mean this reduction does not benefit the staff concerned, nonetheless the tariff reduction may encourage departments to recognize the difficulties for staff in special circumstances. It should therefore be made clear in the guidance that the environment statement should include an account of the mechanisms employed to ensure that the individual circumstances of particular staff are properly taken into account in the institution's expectations of their productivity. The tariff reduction thus seems to be the 'least bad' alternative, as not to include some tariff reduction would be to roll back the progress on E&D in REF 2014. Further it could provide a disincentive for UOAs, especially small UOAs, to hire any staff who could be judged not likely to publish high numbers of outputs (such as women of childbearing age). Thus, despite the obvious problems with this solution, we endorse the tariff option.

7b: 'Agree'

Comment: While recognizing that the tariff approach will have some disadvantages, and does not solve the problem entirely, it is probably the best that can be achieved under the new REF framework.

Consultation question 8b

Response:

We feel that greater clarity is needed on how interdisciplinary outputs will be handled. While we welcome the increased emphasis on encouraging interdisciplinary submissions, and the recognition that interdisciplinary work is not simply work which combines elements of two or more disciplines, we are not clear about the mechanisms which will be put in place to ensure that such work is assessed on its merits and excellence. How will interdisciplinary work be assessed in practice? How will cross-referral differ from Ref 2014? Will discussion between different disciplinary sub-panelists be required? How will this be managed and documented? Will the interdisciplinary assessors be required to read and/or monitor all outputs which are flagged as interdisciplinary? How will REF ensure that these works are evaluated for excellence on their own merits, but are not subject to additional assessment which single-disciplinary work is not?

We also note that two of the other sub-panels require statements on author contribution for works with multiple authors, and while this is less common in the arts and humanities, it can still happen in some areas (such as philosophy), so a statement might be advisable in panel D also, perhaps for works with over three authors.

Consultation question 9

Response:

It was noted that the glossary of output types now includes translations and scholarly editions, and that this is to be welcomed.

Consultation question 10a

Response:

Agreed

Consultation question 11a

This concerns whether authors from the *same* UoA can submit as co-authors. Arguments were presented on both sides. The main argument in favour is that this encourages collaborative work within UoAs, and funders often require collaboration; while the main arguments against were that this could encourage game playing, as less active researchers are artificially 'paired up' with more active ones, and also that it involves counting one piece of research twice within the same UoA, which is in tension with one rationale for decoupling outputs from authors, namely thinking of REF as measuring the quality of research conducted within the UoA. A divergence of views remained, and it was therefore agreed to leave the response to this question open.

Consultation question 13b

We would like to raise an issue relating to the wording in this section on impact, concerning the link between underpinning research and impact that involves public engagement.

§318c of GS for REF2021 states: "Impacts on, for example, public awareness, attitudes, understanding or behaviour that arose from engaging the public with research. In these cases, the submitting unit must show that the engagement activity was, at least in part, based on the submitted unit's research and drew materially and distinctly upon it." The phrase "draw materially" seems to suggest that research itself has to be presented, which we think is not in fact intended? This would also go against the feedback from the Philosophy sub-pane from REF2014 which states: "The sub-panel agreed that valuable impact can occur when the contribution made by a researcher arises from their general expertise as a researcher in the field rather than being generated by specific instances of their cutting-edge research". We believe this is also the intended approach for REF2021, but the talk of a 'direct link' may suggest that the researcher is expected to be presenting their specific views or ideas. We therefore request clarification on this matter, and if necessary a re-drafting of this section.

Consultation question 12a

Not applicable

Consultation question 15b

We are concerned that there is unclarity around the role of the institutional level statement on environment. We are still unclear on how it is going to be used. We know that it is not going to be used for the scoring of the UoA, but we do not know how it is going to be used beyond that. We also believe that the language around this issue is also not very helpful, with talk of this being a 'pilot study' – for what purpose?

Consultation question 16

We would like to raise two issue with the revised thresholds that cover the relation between case studies and staff numbers (§303): (a) Small UoAs are required to submit the same number of case studies as medium sized UoAs of up to 19 staff, which puts these smaller UoAs at disadvantage. (b) There is a disincentive on UoAs which are close to the impact threshold to hire new staff, as if they go to the next level, more case studies will be required, with the effect that impact considerations are undermining the growth of departments, and thus their research development and environment. The danger is therefore that considerations around impact are having a detrimental effect on research quality.

Regarding (a): we would like to propose re-considering the option of allowing small units to submit just one case study. We recognize that this may mean that the resulting score will then be more easily attributable to those engaged in the case study, but believe that in practice even with two case studies this can be done fairly easily, and that this cost is outweighed by the benefit of lessening the case study load on small UoAs.

B. Draft Panel Criteria

Part 2, Unit of Assessment Descriptors

These were approved

Part 3, Section 1: Submissions

Consultation question 2c:

A concern was raised over §170: ‘The sub-panels expect that outputs flagged as interdisciplinary would normally incorporate research crossing main panel areas, but recognise that flagged outputs may also span disciplines across the sub-panels within a main panel, as well as sometimes within a sub-panel – particularly where UOAs cover a broad range of disciplines.’

The use of the word ‘normally’ here is in tension with §§381-383, which explicitly says that the interdisciplinary identifier is ‘in addition to, and distinct from, the cross-referral process’. We therefore suggest the deletion of ‘normally’ in §170; adding ‘some’ before ‘outputs’; and replacing ‘would’ and ‘may’ with ‘will’, to give:

‘The sub-panels expect that some outputs flagged as interdisciplinary will incorporate research crossing main panel areas, but recognise that flagged outputs will also span disciplines across the sub-panels within a main panel, as well as sometimes within a sub-panel – particularly where UOAs cover a broad range of disciplines.’

Part 3, Section 2: Impact

Consultation question 3c:

No additional responses.

Part 3, Section 3: Environment

Consultation question 3c:

No additional responses.