

REF 2021 consultation on the draft guidance and criteria

Page 2: Respondent details

Q1. Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of:

Subject association or learned society

Q2. Please provide the name of your organisation.

The British Philosophical Association

Q3. If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

j.morrison@qub.ac.uk

Q4. If your response is in relation to specific main panels, please indicate which one(s):

Main Panel D: Arts and Humanities (Sub-Panels 25-34)

Q5. We are seeking views during the consultation on both the draft guidance on submissions and the draft panel criteria and working methods. Please select the documents for which you would like to provide a response:

Both documents

Page 3: Guidance on submissions: Part 1: Overview of the assessment framework

Q6. 1a. The guidance is clear in 'Part 1: Overview of the assessment framework':

Agree

Page 4: Guidance on submissions: Part 2: Submissions

Q7. 2a. The guidance is clear in 'Part 2: Submissions':

Agree

Page 5: Guidance on submissions: Part 3, Section 1: Staff details (REF1a/b)

Q8. 3a. The guidance is clear in 'Part 3, Section 1: Staff details':

Agree

Q9. 4. Possible indicators of research independence are set out at paragraph 130, including a reference to a list of independent fellowships. This list is intended to guide institutions on determining independence for staff holding fellowships from major research funders. The list is not intended to be comprehensive. Do you have any comments on the clarity, usefulness, or coverage of this list? (Indicative 300 word limit)

We considered the case of postdoctoral researchers 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. We ask for a clear statement from the REF panel on whether such fellows (i.e. Marie Curie fellows) should be considered 'independent' and added to the list of fellowships which are standardly assumed to be such.

Q10. 5a. Do you agree with the proposed eligibility of seconded staff set out at paragraphs 121.c to d?

Other (please specify):
not applicable

Q11. 6a. Do you agree with the proposed ineligibility of staff based in a discrete department or unit outside the UK?

Yes

Page 6: Guidance on submissions: Part 3, Section 1: Staff circumstances (paragraphs 149 to 193)

Q12. 7a. The proposed approach for taking account of circumstances will achieve the aim of promoting equality and diversity in REF 2021:

Agree

Please provide any comments on your answer. (Indicative 300 word limit)

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 recognise 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.

Q13. 7b. The potential advantages of the proposed approach outweigh the potential drawbacks identified:

Agree

Please provide any comments on your answer. (Indicative 300 word limit)

While recognising 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.

Page 7: Guidance on submissions: Part 3, Section 2: Research outputs (REF2)

Q15. 8a. The guidance in 'Part 3, Section 2: Research outputs' is clear:

Disagree

8b. Please provide any comments on Part 3, Section 2. (Indicative 300 word limit)

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.

Q16. 9. A glossary of output types and collection formats is set out at Annex K, to provide increased clarity to institutions on categorising types of output for submission. Do you have any comments on the clarity and usefulness of this annex? (Indicative 300 word limit)

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

Q17. 10a. Paragraph 206.b sets out the funding bodies' intention to make ineligible the outputs of former staff who have been made redundant (except where the staff member has taken voluntary redundancy). Do you agree with this proposal?

Yes

Q18. 11a. Do you agree with the proposed intention to permit the submission of co-authored outputs only once within the same submission?

Other (please specify):

A divergence of views remained, and it was therefore agreed to leave the response to this question open.

11b. Please provide any comments on this proposal. (Indicative 300 word limit)

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.

Page 8: Guidance on submissions: Part 3, Section 2: Research activity cost for UOA 4

Q19. 12a. How feasible do you consider to be the approach set out at paragraphs 267 to 271 for capturing information on the balance of research activity of different costs within submitting units in UOA 4? (Indicative 300 word limit)

N/A

Page 9: Guidance on submissions: Part 3, Section 3: Impact (REF3)

Q22. 13a. The guidance in 'Part 3, Section 3: Impact' is clear:

Disagree

13b. Please provide any comments on Part 3, Section 3. (Indicative 300 word limit)

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-panel 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.

Page 10: Guidance on submissions: Part 3, Sections 4-5: Environment data and environment (REF4a/b/c-REF5a/b)

Q23. 14a. The guidance in 'Part 3, Section 4: Environment data' is clear:

Agree

Q24. 15a. The guidance in 'Part 3, Section 5: Environment' is clear:

Disagree

15b. Please provide any comments on Part 3, Section 5. (Indicative 300 word limit)

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?

Page 11: Guidance on Submissions: further comments

Q25. 16. Please provide any further comments on the 'Guidance on submissions', including Annexes A-M. (Indicative 500 word limit)

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 recognise 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.

Page 12: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 2: Unit of assessment descriptors

Q26. 1. Do the UOA descriptors provide a clear and appropriate description of the disciplines covered by the UOAs? Please include any suggestions for refining the descriptors and state which UOA(s) you are commenting on.

UOA 30: Philosophy

Page 13: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 3, Section 1: Submissions

Q27. 2a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in 'Part 3, Section 1: Submissions':

Agree

Q28. 2b. Overall, the criteria are clear in 'Part 3, Section 1: Submissions':

Agree

Q29. 2c. Please comment on the criteria in 'Part 3, Section 1: Submissions', in particular on:- where further clarification is required- where refinements could be made- whether there are areas where more consistency across panels could be achieved- whether there are differences between the disciplines that justify further differentiation between the main panel criteria. Where referring to particular main panels, please state which one(s). (Indicative 300 word limit)

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.'

Page 14: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 3, Section 2: Outputs

Q30. 3a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in 'Part 3, Section 2: Outputs':

Agree

Q31. 3b. Overall, the criteria are clear in 'Part 3, Section 2: Outputs':

Agree

Page 15: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 3, Section 3: Impact

Q33. 4a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in 'Part 3, Section 3: Impact':

Agree

Q34. 4b. Overall, the criteria are clear in 'Part 3, Section 3: Impact':

Agree

Page 16: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 3, Section 4: Environment

Q36. 5a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in 'Part 3, Section 5: Environment':

Agree

Q37. 5b. Overall, the criteria are clear in 'Part 3, Section 4: Environment':

Agree

Page 17: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 4: Panel procedures

Q39. 6a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in 'Part 4: Panel procedures':

Agree

Q40. 6b. Overall, the criteria are clear in 'Part 4: Panel procedures':

Agree

Page 18: Panel criteria and working methods: Part 5: Panel working methods

Q42. 7a. a. Overall, the criteria are appropriate in 'Part 5: Panel working methods':

Agree

Q43. 7b. Overall, the criteria are clear in 'Part 5: Panel working methods':

Agree

Page 19: Overall panel criteria and working methods

Q45. 8a. Overall, the 'Panel criteria and working methods' achieves an appropriate balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the panels.

Agree

