

# Update on the future of the REF

February 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

The future of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a priority for UCU's work in higher education. As part of this work we will be responding to the consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework and this briefing requests feedback on some of the main recommendations in the consultation document.

## BACKGROUND TO THE CONSULTATION – THE STERN REVIEW

In December 2015 the UK government established the independent review of the REF (the so-called Stern review). UCU responded to the initial review and following the publication of the final report in July we undertook a short consultation exercise with members. Almost 200 responses from members were received on three core proposals in the report. These were the proposals for:

- 1 all 'research active' staff to be included in the next REF
- 2 an average of 2 outputs per staff member returned, but with flexibility for some individuals to submit more and others less than the average
- 3 ending the portability of REF outputs.

Unsurprisingly, there were a variety of individual views on these issues. In general, respondents welcomed the possibility of greater staff inclusion in the next REF, but many were concerned that the new rules may usher in further reclassification of academic staff on to 'teaching only' contracts.

In general, members were supportive of the idea of moving away from four outputs per staff member. For some, the main advantage was that it could reduce the pressure to publish and allow for recognition of variations in the nature and pace of academic work. Alternatively, others expressed concerns that this greater 'flexibility' would be used by senior managers to bring in new forms of internal selection procedures (eg priority will be given to senior professors with six outputs at the expense of early career academics).

On ending portability, the majority of respondents registered strong concerns about the detrimental impact of this proposal on career access, academic mobility and the 'ownership' of research. Early career academics on fixed-term contracts, in particular, felt that this proposal fails to take into account their precarious employment situation

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and will make it even harder for them to get their first permanent post. For more established staff, portability was viewed as a key bargaining chip for negotiating adequate working conditions and salaries, while other members were irked by the suggestion that their publications are 'owned' by institutions, particularly when in some cases there has been limited institutional support for that research.

Alternatively, a smaller number of respondents were highly critical of the REF 'transfer market' and its impact on equal opportunities and working conditions, and felt that ending portability might force institutions to invest in the potential of existing staff.

### **FUNDING COUNCILS' CONSULTATION ON THE SECOND REF**

In December, the UK funding councils published a consultation document on the implementation of the Stern proposals. The document is a highly technical one which has more than 40 questions on issues such as the unit of assessment, panel structure, staff, metrics, impact criteria, and research environment.

UCU will be responding to the consultation and we would welcome your views on the key issues for members.

#### **Selection of staff (pp 10-11)**

The consultation document supports the idea of all 'research active' staff being included in the next REF. It proposes a definition of 'research active' staff based on 'Teaching and Research' and 'Research only' categories used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

In terms of 'research assistants', the recommendation is to continue with a similar definition of 'independent researcher' as used in the 2014 REF.

**The consultation recognises the potential impact on contractual changes and asks for views on the likely impact of this happening.**

**In order to strengthen our case in this area, UCU would welcome evidence from your department or institution on whether this already occurring or likely to occur as a result of the Stern proposals.**

**We would also welcome ideas on possible approaches to mitigate against such an effect in the REF.**

#### **Decoupling staff from outputs in the assessment (pp 11-12)**

The document accepts the principle of greater flexibility in the number of outputs per staff member, although it doesn't come up with concrete proposals on numbers.

Instead, it asks: should it be an average of two outputs per submitted staff member, and what should the maximum and minimum requirements be for each staff member?

The original Stern report suggested that it would be possible for some research active staff to submit zero outputs, whereas the consultation document asks whether there should be a minimum requirement of one output.

**For UCU, the key issue will be how best to ensure a fair and transparent procedure for all staff, while avoiding detrimental 'unintended' consequences (eg the enforced use of teaching only contracts). For that reason, we believe that the original suggestion of zero outputs should be retained, although we would welcome your thoughts on this.**

*The consultation document recognises the adverse effects on staff on fixed-term contracts and asks whether portability should be retained for these individuals. We would welcome your thoughts on these two inter-related issues and on broader challenges facing the implementation of these proposals*

We are also keen to ensure that equality and diversity procedures are embedded in the process and so would welcome comments on how best to achieve this within a more ‘flexible’ system of outputs.

### **Portability of outputs (pp 12-13)**

Given the largely negative response to this proposal in the Stern review, the consultation document recognises the challenges that may result from ending the portability of REF outputs and asks for comments on a range of technical and career-related issues.

For example, it asks whether ‘acceptance for publication’ is appropriate for the full range of different outputs produced in the REF (eg monographs, films and performances as well as journal articles).

It also highlights the potential difficulties of verifying the institutional eligibility of individual outputs and asks whether it would be possible to share outputs proportionally across institutions?

Moreover, the consultation document recognises the adverse effects on staff on fixed-term contracts and asks whether portability should be retained for these individuals. We would welcome your thoughts on these two inter-related issues and on broader challenges facing the implementation of these proposals.

In general, UCU welcomes the fact that the funding councils have flagged up the challenges in this area and we will be raising our own specific concerns, including the impact on the ownership of research, in response to the consultation document.

### **Institutional-level assessment (pp 26-28)**

The Stern review also proposed that the next REF should include assessment of research impact and environment at institutional level, undertaken by an institutional assessment panel. The consultation document asks for comments and views on this major change to the REF.

UCU would welcome your comments on this proposed change, particularly the potential impact on post-1992 universities.

We would also welcome your comments on any other proposals in the consultation document (for example, the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of research impact – see pp 18-19).

Please can you send in any comments to Rob Copeland, UCU policy officer [rcopeland@ucu.org.uk](mailto:rcopeland@ucu.org.uk) by no later than Wednesday 1 March.

Finally, in addition to a collective UCU response, it would be helpful for as many individuals as possible to also respond to the document. This is particularly the case in relation to the main staffing-related questions (ie questions 7-10 on pages 10-13:

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/refconsultation>

The official deadline for responses to the consultation is Friday 17 March.