

## Sub-panel 23: Sociology

### Quality profiles

Profile type	4* (%)	3* (%)	2* (%)	1* (%)	UC (%)
Overall	27	45	26	2	0
Outputs	19.7	47.9	30.4	1.8	0.2
Impact	43.2	39.4	13.6	3.3	0.5
Environment	35.1	44.9	18.5	1.4	0.1

### Summary of submissions

1. 29 submissions were received in UOA 23 (Sociology). A total of 704 Category A staff were submitted for assessment. The submissions included 2,630 outputs and 100 impact case studies.

### Sub-panel working methods

2. Assessment of all elements in the submissions was subject to oversight by Main Panel C. This oversight included calibration, moderation, and audit of assessments, as specified in the 'Panel Criteria and Working Methods' and as reported in the Main Panel Overview.

3. The allocation of research outputs for assessment was expertise-led, with a second reader being the co-ordinator for an individual institution's submission. All outputs were double-read independently by the pairs of sub-panel members and agreed grades were subject to moderation at sub-panel level. The outputs from each institution were assessed by a large number of pairs drawn from across the whole sub-panel.

4. All Environment Templates, Impact Templates, and Impact Case Studies were considered by all sub-panel members. Assessments by assessor pairs were reported and discussed in plenary sessions to arrive at an agreed grade. In plenary discussions, panellists with conflicts of interests withdrew for the discussion of the particular institutions for which they were conflicted. The sub-panel held additional calibration and moderation exercises for each element in the assessment.

5. The area covered by the Sociology UOA is specified in the 'Panel Criteria and Working Methods' as encompassing the empirical and theoretical study of social structures, cultures, and everyday practices of societies. As such, it relates closely to interdisciplinary fields relevant to other sub-panels. Much sociological work is undertaken in Schools and Departments where it is combined with Social Policy or Social Work, in Schools of Business and Management, in Schools of Health and Medicine, in Schools of Education and in other collaborative contexts. Research in Sociology has therefore been submitted in several UOAs in REF2014 and it is noted that a substantial body of sociological research appears as an integral element of the submissions made to UOA 22 (Social Work and Social Policy), as well as to UOAs 2 Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care, 19 Business and Management Studies, 25 Education, 26 Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism, and 36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management. The work submitted in the Sociology UOA is, therefore, a partial representation of the discipline, encompassing the work of, predominantly, the stand-alone, single discipline departments rather than that done in the combined departments and interdisciplinary

units. A full picture of the state of sociological work could be based only on the vast amount of work submitted to all UOAs and the comments here relate only to the work submitted in this UOA.

6. A significant number of research outputs were cross-referred in to UOA 23 from other sub-panels and from sub-panels in other main panel areas. Sub-panel 23 referred little material out to other sub-panels.

7. Since criminology outputs were submitted in a number of UOAs (notably 20 Law, 22 Social Work and Social Policy and 23 Sociology), procedures were implemented during the assessment period to ensure broad consistency of approach between them. These included the appointment of a joint assessor working across these three sub-panels, a joint calibration exercise and Main Panel C oversight of the assessment profiles as they emerged. Comments specific to the criminological work submitted in this UOA are reported below.

8. The published Guidelines for the REF encouraged institutions to submit the work of all their eligible researchers. It was clear from the Environment templates, however, that institutions had adopted varying criteria in their selection of staff for submission. The number of impact case studies submitted varied according to the number of researchers within a unit and to institutional selectivity.

Although each element was given a different weight in the scoring of the overall profiles, the sub-panel regards the overall profile and the various sub-profiles as being equally significant in reflecting different aspects of research quality. Attention must be paid to the constituent sub-profiles of Outputs, Impact, and Research Environment and to the comments relating to these as well as to the summary overall profile.

## **Outputs**

9. The outputs submitted demonstrated clearly the diversity and vibrancy of sociological research, confirming the judgment of the 2010 ESRC International Benchmarking Review. There was a clear improvement in overall research output quality by comparison with RAE2008. The sub-panel was particularly encouraged by the submission of strong work in theory and in philosophy of social science, areas that had been noted as poorly represented in submissions to RAE2008. It was clear that much high quality theoretical work was being undertaken. This was also apparent in the large amount of theoretically informed empirical work in many specialist areas.

10. There were clear signs of improvement in quantitative skills and in the rigour and innovativeness of qualitative methods. Very high quality methodological work was submitted and empirical papers showed clearly the enhanced skills in these areas that have developed during the REF assessment period. Much of this work was judged to be at the frontier of social science methodological work. Significant work engaged with developments around 'big data' and digital data practices, including the role of expert knowledge, and explored its implications for sociological research. Equally significant was the finding that the rigorous application of scientific procedures and method in outputs is now routine practice. Notable were the large number of outputs reporting mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative.

11. Substantive areas in which large numbers of high quality outputs were submitted included: race and ethnicity, with especially interesting work on migration and borders: health and biomedicine; and social studies of science. The large number of submissions in social studies of science and technology showed clear evidence of the maturity of this sub-discipline, albeit that this work was characterised by a relative lack of conceptual or methodological innovation. Less strong was some work in media and communications, though some sociological work in this area

was submitted in UOA 36 (Communications, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management). Across all areas there was a notable engagement with issues of globalisation and cross-national research.

12. The large number of outputs rated at 4\* or 3\* are clear indicators of the increase in the overall quality of sociological research. However, the sub-panel welcomed the submission of the substantial body of work that was assessed at the 2\* level. This work contributes to incremental and cumulative advances in knowledge in the field and such 'normal' science is evidence of the maturity of research in a range of specialisms. It provides the foundations on which important and essential points of reference can be built and critical breakthroughs can be made.

13. The number of criminological outputs submitted in the UOA was less than anticipated but they were all submitted to sociology appropriately. This is in contrast to RAE2008 where a noticeable proportion of the criminological work submitted came from a wider range of disciplinary bases. The sub-panel noted the immense overlap between Criminology (so-labelled) and other areas of sociology such as studies on gender-based violence. This indicated a fruitful synergy between criminological and other sociological work within the units submitted. A large proportion of the criminological outputs in REF2014 were judged to be internationally excellent or world-leading mirroring the profile outputs submitted to the panel as a whole.

14. In RAE2001, a separate Women's Studies sub-subpanel had been established to consider gender-based work in sociology and that cross-referred from other sub-panels, including Literature and History. The volume of referrals in this area had declined by 2008 as gender issues had become more thoroughly embedded in mainstream research. The 2014 sub-panel noted the inclusion of gender issues across all specialisms within the discipline and received no requests for cross-referral of outputs on women and gender. It was clear that a large volume of gender-based research was being undertaken and submitted to the subpanel and that this was strongly embedded in a range of substantive areas of sociology. The subpanel noted the high quality of much of this work.

15. Strength was apparent in outputs of all types, including books, articles, and chapters, with the highest grades being awarded across the full range of research outputs. It was noted, however, that chapters in books with limited research content tended to score at lower levels. Monograph publication is an important feature of sociological research and the sub-panel welcomed the inclusion of books in institutional submissions. The higher grades often earned by monographs, as compared with some articles, reflected the strength of sustained engagement afforded by book-length publication as compared with most journals that require relatively short articles. The articles submitted came from an impressive range of specialist journals of international standing as well as from major general journals. This is a feature of journal publication within sociology and the subpanel judged all articles on their quality not their place of publication.

16. Relatively few requests for double-weighting were received; those that were received came from a small number of institutions. The sub-panel considered the cases made and examined the outputs against these claims in order to assess whether outputs had passed the published threshold of scale and scope to be given double-weighting. The sub-panel felt that the criteria for double-weighting may have led to a cautious strategy being adopted in many institutions and felt that a number of other requests might have been made successfully.

17. The sub-panel welcomed the widespread inclusion of ECRs and noted the very high quality of work submitted by such staff in many units. Especially notable were the ways in which such staff were engaging productively with both qualitative and quantitative methods. It also welcomed

the submission of smaller units where sociological research was to be built up through institutional investment.

## **Impact**

18. The sub-panel was impressed by the extremely high levels of reach and significance in the majority of case studies submitted. The involvement of user representatives in the sub-panel and as impact assessors was a wholly positive feature of the exercise. The user voice was invaluable as a guarantor that impact had been adequately assessed. Sociological work of all kinds demonstrated with evidence its ability to speak to and contribute to policy issues and critical public discourse. Sociology, compared with many other disciplines, is able to avail itself of more, and more varied, opportunities to conduct research with potential impact, and units were therefore more able to select from a greater number of persuasive cases. The large number of highly rated case studies across the UOA indicates the clear commitment of sociologists to ensuring the impact and public benefit of their work. Sociological research has directly informed public policy, changed the terms of public debate over key issues, and has been directly embedded in changes to training and delivery practices in the public, private, and third sectors. This impact has been apparent at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

19. This was the first research assessment to explicitly assess impact and many units presented policy-related work rather than the critical and transformational work that is such an important feature of the discipline. Where such critical and transformational work was submitted, the sub-panel was often impressed by its quality and its ability to score highly. The sub-panel encourages units to submit such work in future exercises.

20. Case studies that were assessed at lower grades were predominantly those in which presentational issues led to a failure to depict the impact of the research with sufficient adequacy. Evidence to justify claims was sometimes missing or incomplete, the nature of the impact was not always clearly stated, and there was not always a clear narrative linking the actual research to its claimed impact.

21. The requirement for a minimum of two case studies meant that very small units were expected to demonstrate impact for a higher proportion of their research work. The sub-panel noted that in some small submissions, one of the two case studies was notably weaker than the other.

22. In submissions where criminological work was especially prominent, impact case studies were judged to have the same range of excellence in their reach and significance as case studies in other areas.

Impact templates were uneven in terms of their quality. In many cases the sub-panel found a strong strategy for establishing pathways to impact and a clear description of the current approach to impact. Less strong across the UOA were the reflections on case studies. The best of the Impact templates drew out conclusions from the success of the case studies and showed how these had contributed to the development of an impact strategy and strategic thinking. The weakest of the Impact templates simply used the final section of the template to restate the case studies in summary form. In these submissions it often appeared that case studies and Impact templates had been drafted independently and with little overall crafting to show that there was a genuine reflection on patterns of engagement

## **Research environment**

23. Environment templates reported on Research Strategy, Staffing and Research Students, Income and Facilities, and Collaboration and Contribution to the Discipline. The sub-panel was

able to attain a good understanding of the varying ways in which units were developing the discipline within their institutions and of the degree of institutional support provided. There were clear signs of institutional investment in Sociology and of innovative strategic responses to the external environment. Submissions showed strong evidence on the academic impact of their research within and beyond the discipline, on their role in editorial and other professional work, and on their very high level of regional, national, and international collaboration.

24. Environment templates were, however, variable in quality and there were variations in the quality of presentation. It was clear that the 'Panel Criteria and Working Methods' guidance had not always been followed, resulting in material appearing in the wrong sub-sections or being omitted altogether. Those supervising the writing of the submissions were not always aware of the ways in which the guidance relating to Main Panel C differed from that relating to other Main Panels. In some cases, there was evidence of centrally drafted 'boiler-plate' text, with no indication that such central facilities were embedded in the unit's practices and procedures.

25. Many units, both large and small, demonstrated a clear strategy for developing their research quality, postgraduate research student numbers, and research income. This reporting, however, was uneven across the UOA, with some units listing achievements rather than documenting the strategy that may have underpinned these achievements, and some omitting reference to staffing strategy and succession planning. It was clear that there had been much restructuring at institutional level across the sector and that some institutions were better able to handle the consequent staff turnover. In some cases, the rapidity of change had made it difficult for a long-term strategy and future plans to be properly demonstrated. Some very small institutions in process of building their research capacity found it difficult to score highly as their templates were necessarily aspirational. The sub-panel was, however, pleased to recognise the potential of these units on the assumption that anticipated institutional support will be forthcoming.

26. The sub-panel noted that some fractional appointees whose outputs were submitted had appointments elsewhere and were not shown to be embedded in the research environment of the unit.

27. There was evidence across the UOA that equality and diversity issues were regarded as extremely important and as a central feature of the planning of the research environment and in relation to staffing strategies, mechanisms of support, and opportunities for career development. The sub-panel noted with concern, however, that a number of units made no mention of equality and diversity issues.

28. Postgraduate research training was well evidenced in many institutions. There was gratifying evidence in a number of cases that the ESRC Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) had been embedded in institutional practices and procedures. In some cases, however, it was striking that no mention was made of the contribution of a DTC to the research environment. It was noted that a number of institutions were finding it more difficult to recruit postgraduate research students because they were not part of a DTC. The sub-panel was concerned that this would have a cumulative effect over the coming years and hopes that some way will be found of including more institutions within a broad umbrella when the DTCs become Doctoral Training Partnerships in 2017.