



Assessment of people, culture and environment in REF 2028

Joint response of the British Sociological Association and the Council of UK Heads and Professors of Sociology

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Our concerns about the proposals for the 'people, culture and environment' (PCE) segment of the new Research Evaluation Framework are largely about their possible unintended consequences. In the first instance, they need to be placed in the context of the articulation of PCE with the other two elements, Outputs and Impact and Engagement case studies. In principle, excellence in the latter two categories is a guide to excellence in PCE. We accept that the focus of PCE is longer term 'reproducibility' of research culture, while the evaluation of outputs and case studies provides a 'snapshot'. Nonetheless, we believe that the reduced proportion of the grading and the associated lack of input from the Subject and Main Panels is highly problematic. We consider that there should be a process where UofA and Main Panel considerations of what contributes to excellence in their subject domains provides insight into appropriate indicators for the assessment of PCE. We can see no appreciation that 'subject panels' are also stakeholders in the determination of excellence in PCE as, in our view, they should be.

We note that the development of indicators will be subject to commercial tender and we are concerned that this will be directed towards those that are common across subject areas, rather than differentiated according to specific disciplinary, or, indeed certain interdisciplinary, needs. This concern is reinforced by the fact that the subject specific aspects of research culture will now be presented as part of a university level statement; there will be pressures within each university toward a common approach across subject areas, a pressure that is likely to produce an environment appropriate to the natural sciences (in many institutions responsible for the bulk of research income and QR income). We consider that while it is unlikely that a large scale natural science unit could thrive without the support of a strong institutional research environment, it is perfectly possible – and indeed has been proved to be the case in previous exercises – that in smaller units, such as is often the case for Sociology, a strong local research environment can ensure excellence. We note that this emphasis on large-scale research is evident in the inclusion of 'research enabling staff' alongside 'research active staff' in the FTE count for determining the number of outputs to be submitted. We believe that this will further skew the distribution of QR funds away from the social sciences and humanities, as well as indicating that natural science understandings of appropriate PCE will dominate to the possible detriment of social science and humanities.

We welcome the fact that the procurement exercise endorses the principles of the recent COARA [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#). These include an emphasis on *research integrity*, *diversity* and inclusion, *freedom of research*, encouragement of *originality*,

and institutional *autonomy*. We believe the latter should incorporate the autonomy of different subject areas to pursue their own conceptions of excellence in research.

We believe that the PCE reinforces centralising pressures both within universities and also upon universities. This will be at the expense of diversity. There are no measures to mitigate this risk because of the way the REF co-produces outcomes that are self-legitimising. Although public bodies are enjoined to reduce the burden of bureaucracy and the new arrangements are claimed to do that, they do so by significantly enhancing the powers of university systems of research management over the collegial practices of researchers.

We note a further tendency toward uniformity that is flagged in the new criteria for the assessment of outputs, which will also have consequences for research culture under PCE. This is the fact that, “at least 10% of the score will be based on evidence of the broader contributions to the advancement of the discipline.” This introduces a judgement about the nature of the kind of work being done within a subject area independently of the intrinsic merit of a particular output. It is potentially damaging in terms both of diversity and the development of critical perspectives. In this way it embodies the perspective of ‘normal science’ and the potential diminution of originality. We believe that there is a risk that this will interact with the proposals for PCE to encourage training programmes in generic social science, at the cost of disciplinary differences (and differences within disciplines). Much is made of problems of interdisciplinary research within the REF, but we believe that a neglected, but serious issue is that of maintaining disciplinary research and diversity within disciplines.

While we are reassured by the desire to consult with stakeholders, and the engagement with a variety of expert groups, we believe that there should be explicit safeguards put in place to protect diversity of the research environment across and within universities. We believe that there is a risk that the interests of larger universities, especially those with ‘big science’ will outweigh those of smaller universities and specialist institutions. There is a serious risk that, rather than create a ‘vibrant research system’ the selected indicators will have a ‘flattening’ effect that produces uniformity. Indeed, we are concerned that the [FRAP](#) processes already represent a significant degree of top-down steering of the system that reinforces these risks.

We note that the discussion of PCE neglects the role and effects of the agencies that fund research. We now have a highly centralised system through the incorporation of research councils within a single entity, UKRI. This body is responsible both for funding research through the QR mechanism and through the research grants system. We are concerned that there is no evaluation process (or indicators) suggested for the consideration of the research system at its highest level, only a process for the determination of the distribution of QR funds.

Most of our concerns turn upon the impact of centralisation on the research system. It is clear that the proposals reinforce central university research governance mechanisms. At the same time, they create a set of ‘interlocutors’ for national bodies. In this way, they make research governance primarily an issue for senior management within a university rather than of researchers themselves. We believe that this is a problem in itself, but it also has potentially serious consequences for research integrity. We note that the procurement specification [highlights a study](#) which, “revealed that articles in high impact journals (which are perceived to be favoured in research assessment) are more likely to be retracted.” We think that this may indicate problems with the current proposals. At present, research misconduct is a corporate responsibility of each university. Under the new proposals for PCE this creates a moral hazard where universities may be unwilling to pursue research misconduct rigorously within their institution. We believe that there should be an external body – as was previously proposed for the UK Research Integrity Office – with statutory powers to which possible research misconduct may be reported. This should also include scope for the reporting of equalities and diversity issues from subject areas and departments within universities.