



British Philosophical Association

The British Philosophical Association
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Wednesday, 23 March 2016

Re. Lord Stern's REF Review

Dear Sir or Madam,

I write on behalf of the British Philosophical Association to contribute to Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework. In putting this response together, we have drawn extensively on insights provided by Prof. Alexander Bird, Chair of the REF 2014 Philosophy panel, and have consulted with Heads of Departments of Philosophy across the UK.

Q1

Question 1 raises the issue of using metrics in assessing research quality. Assuming that this refers to bibliometrics / cybermetrics / altmetrics, then the arguments that all areas of the Academy presented before REF2014 are pertinent again – such metrics are particularly unsuited to the humanities. The BPA issued a position paper in response to HEFCE's call for evidence on this topic in April 2014, available [here](#). The BPA hold that **there is no quantitative substitute for academic judgement of research quality, and that the important concept of peer-evaluated research excellence should not be replaced or supplanted by a distinct, quantitative measure.**

An alternative possibility that has been mentioned in some quarters is to replace the REF with a division of QR money on the basis of certain other metrics, above all RCUK income. **We reject this proposal, as we think it is important for QR funding decisions to be determined in isolation from RCUK funding decisions.** The RCUK competitions are geared primarily to larger scale research projects, while an institution can have high quality research originating from smaller scaled work which would be missed if all decisions were assessed by performance in RCUK schemes. Preserving a route to QR money which is independent of RCUK funding decisions allows institutions leeway in the research that they promote and support, and this is particularly important for departments or individuals who work outside the mainstream in UK Philosophy.

Q2

A crucial issue for Philosophy is the preservation of a subpanel/unit of assessment for our subject alone. Before REF2014 the possibility of a joint subpanel with Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) was mooted, and since then the possibility of a joint subpanel with TRS and Classics has been raised. Question 2 asks 'what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014?'. The answer to this question is:

- **It allows for comparison of departments in the same subject across institutions.** This is useful information for institutions, for research funders, and for students (e.g. prospective graduate students). It assists with international benchmarking, one of the stated aims of the REF.
- **There are no benefits to including Philosophy in a larger UoA:**

- In some fields institutional units did not map easily onto the smaller UoAs of RAE2008 nor do they map onto units in other institutions, in which case larger UoAs may make sense. Philosophy is not in this position: **almost all UK philosophy departments fitted well with the UoA descriptor, and there are hardly any cases of departments that fitted partly with the Philosophy UoA and partly with another so that it was not clear where they belonged.** In particular, only in a small number of institutions is Philosophy in the same School as TRS or Classics, and in a number of institutions Philosophy is in a different Faculty (Division etc.) from those subjects.
- **There are no economies of scale:**
 - The bulk of the work undertaken was the process of reading and assessing outputs. This is not affected by the size of the UoA. Since the workload was the main determinant of the number of subpanel members, a larger panel would not need fewer members in total than two smaller panels.
 - There are no benefits as regards time spent in subpanel meetings. Indeed there may be disadvantages (philosophy panels members of a joint Philosophy/TRS panel would have to listen to discussions of points relevant only to TRS and vice-versa).
 - A joint subpanel would not reduce the number of panel members needed to cover a range of expertise; the quantity of interdisciplinary work with TRS or Classics was tiny.

Question 2 also asks 'Would there be advantages in reporting on some dimensions of the REF (e.g. impact and/or environment) at a more aggregate or institutional level?'. **The BPA thinks that aggregation at institutional level will render invisible, and seriously disadvantage, the strong work in weaker institutions.** Strong work in weaker institutions is acknowledged to be stronger than the medium-to-weak level work in stronger institutions. As such, institutional aggregation will result in abandoning commitment to the idea of rewarding excellence "wherever it is found", one of the stated aims of the REF.

Q3, Q4 and Q5

Stern's Q3 recognises that the REF can shape academic behaviour and then goes on to ask 'how might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours . . . ?' **We think that this is very dangerous indeed.** The strength of the REF is that it is a peer assessment of research quality; members of the academic community, in part selected by that community, assess the research of their peers according to the agreed standards of the community. That is why, despite its cost and other deficiencies, there is still a fairly widespread acceptance of the REF.

However, with the introduction of Impact in REF2014, there was for the first time a significant element whose aim was to promote a Government policy rather than to aid peer assessment. Impact only partially overlaps with research quality (note that the research quality threshold is only 2*, i.e. a level that does not attract QR funding). Recent rules on Open Access are similar, in that they are there not to assist the assessment of quality but to shape behaviour—a non-compliant output will be excluded however excellent the research it contains.

We believe that academics should reject the premise of this question, that it is sensible to attempt to shape academic behaviour using the REF. So doing will mean that the REF is no longer an assessment of research quality, which will reduce its value e.g. as a measure of quality by shared international standards, and that in turn will reduce its acceptability to the community. **While the REF, and the inclusion of Impact, might well be instances of the Government trying to use a quality audit as a mechanism for shaping the behaviour or research agenda of academics, we think that they should have no such ambitions and should distance themselves from this kind of ambition.**

Q6 and Q7

We are concerned that institutional reactions to the REF tend to exert pressures on individual researchers which (a) discourage original or risky research and (b) focus, almost exclusively, on what are perceived to be the most important sites of journal publication [bibliometrics would certainly make this situation even worse, cf. Q1]. **Our concern is that the way in which institutional managers negotiate or interpret the REF reinforces the dominance within philosophy of its ‘mainstream’, and is disruptive of the research done by departments or individuals who work outside the most established areas of philosophy.** This consequence could be diminished, in part, by replacing the stated criteria for ranking outputs – which are meaningless as they currently stand – with something much more informative.

As long as the REF is principally focussed on assessing outputs by widely shared standards, then the REF aligns with individual motivations: to produce important and influential research, to develop one’s career, and so forth. However, there are some tensions; now that there is a major premium on 4* research and 2* research is unfunded, the REF incentives are in the direction of producing fewer, higher-quality outputs. In contrast, many promotions and appointments processes will tend to reward greater emphasis on quantity, at least above a certain threshold corresponding to the good journals in the field (and REF2014 revealed that this can be as low as 2* even for the most prestigious journals). In this case, however, many might feel that the REF incentives are the right ones: fewer, better outputs.

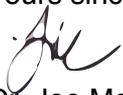
For the most part, **gaming the system can be avoided by incremental improvements in the rules of the REF.** For example, there was some gaming in REF2014 by institutions employing overseas research luminaries on 0.2 contracts. These individuals’ outputs nonetheless counted fully towards the UoA’s profile, thus distorting the apparent quality of the unit. This kind of gaming can be avoided by simple rule changes.

Q9

Small philosophy departments are disadvantaged by the current rules for Impact case studies. At present, UoAs with up to 15 FTE staff are required to submit two Impact case studies, but no concessions are made for UoAs with half this number of staff (or fewer). The situation is exacerbated by staff movement (staff leaving and new staff joining), since new staff are required to build up their impact profile within the submitting UoA, rather than being able to demonstrate the Impact of their research regardless of whether that work was conducted at a different UoA. For smaller departments, it will only take a small amount of staff movement (one or two people) to prevent entry into the REF if two case studies are the minimum requirement. We note that HEFCE’s original proposals suggested that the REF might require only one impact case study per 5-10 FTE; no coherent grounds were given for the eventual decision to require two case studies from UoAs with only this many staff. The BPA’s 2009 position paper on Impact can be found [here](#), where we addressed a wider range of concerns about Philosophy and the role of Impact in the REF.

We have highlighted several key issues and suggested some important changes that we hope that this review will take on board. We note that the various RAEs and the REF have all differed markedly from their predecessors. Such changes add to the burden on institutions and individuals, and we encourage this review to look for small, local, improvements.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Joe Morrison

Director of the British Philosophy Association