# Lord Stern’s review of the Research Excellence Framework - response form

The call for evidence is available at: [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/research-excellence-framework-review-call-for-evidence](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/research-excellence-framework-review-call-for-evidence)

The closing date for responses is **Thursday 24 March 2016**.

Please return completed forms to:

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## Questions

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Please check the box that best describes you as a respondent to this consultation

|  | **Respondent type** |
| --- | --- |
| [ ]  | Alternative higher education provider (with designated courses)  |
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|[ ]  Awarding organisation  |
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| X | Higher Education Institution  |
|[ ]  Individual (Please describe any particular relevant interest; teaching staff, student, etc.)  |
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|[ ]  Research Council |
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If you selected ‘Individual,’ please describe any particular relevant interest; teaching staff, student, etc

Comments: NA

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Comments: NA

*Please note that whilst there is an extended answer to question 1 the total word count used in our entire response is within limits.*

### Section 1

The primary purpose of the REF is to inform the allocation of quality-related research funding (QR).

1. What changes to existing processes could more efficiently or more accurately assess the outputs, impacts and contexts of research in order to allocate QR? Should the definition of impact be broadened or refined? Is there scope for more or different use of metrics in any areas?

**Peer-review and metrics.** We have in previous statements commended the REF for its continuing adherence to expert peer review. There is an almost universal feeling in Goldsmiths that whilst metrics can usefully inform evaluation of research quality in some areas, it would be detrimental to increase reliance on metrics. In most of our disciplinary areas this would be likely to lead to less robust, less nuanced evaluations which bear a weaker relation with actual research quality. Indeed metrics are especially problematic and limited in value within the arts and humanities where citation is inconsistently monitored across the vast array of books, journals and practice and in interdisciplinary research that does not have the same infrastructures of journals, conferences and citation. Whilst it is generally accepted that metrics are of patchy applicability in Arts and Humanities, as The Metric Tide has demonstrated, there are significant concerns even in Goldsmiths’ most ““stem” subject areas, Computing and Psychology, where the correlations between peer-review evaluations and metrics such as citation counts are modest at best.

Our concerns about metrics are further amplified by strong evidence that they are prone to adverse gender, ethnic and early career biases. Any future developments in the use of metrics must adequately recognise and mitigate such undesired consequences.

**Outputs and practice-based research.** We would like to see criteria for evaluating research broadened in ways that would allow non-written outputs to be viewed as sympathetically - but just as rigorously - as written ones. The disproportionate paucity of artefacts and exhibitions as submitted outputs is evidence that institutions feel that there is a bias. The relatively small number of practice common among the departments that get high REF ratings, even in art and design where it has a clear tradition, suggests that the reported nervousness from HE institutions about submitting practice may be well-founded. If universities do not feel re-assured about how practice-based research will be assessed in comparison to written submissions, this may impact on future investment in practice-based research.

We believe that practice-based research is a critical part of the UK’s research eco-system and if it is not supported at universities there will be a sustained negative impact on the quality and diversity of UK research. This is an area where we are have a track record of world-leading research and which has a remarkable record of engagement and impact in the wider world – directly within the creative industries, but also benefiting society and cultural understanding in myriad different ways. The establishment of criteria specifically designed to assess practice could go some way to reassuring departments and universities of a level playing field. We suggest that a national working group be established to suggest new assessment criteria that respect the diversity of approaches and flexible modes of presentation characteristic of such research. Goldsmiths would be very happy to play a leading role in this development.

**Impact.** Then case study approach to evaluating impact has been valuable in highlighting consequences of research which had previously not been recognised, in some cases even by the researchers themselves. Relatedly, case studies gave prominence (internally as well as externally) to research-based achievements, which in former RAEs have been recognised less, if at all, and have enabled us to celebrate and reward the efforts of the staff concerned. Relatedly, although the ICS methodology proved challenging and time-consuming it generated some fascinating and accessible narratives which have been valuable in stimulating new cross-disciplinary interest and collaboration between colleagues internally, and in providing material which has proved engaging to a wide range of external partners, audiences, and stakeholders.

However, the concept of impact is still not felt to be well-enough defined or understood by many staff, especially those working in non-STEM areas. There is a concern about the complexity of impact, what it should mean, how it is assessed, and how it differs from, say, relevance or significance or public engagement. We would welcome opportunities to contribute to further broadening and enriching of its definition, especially drawing from particular disciplinary perspectives. There is also a feeling among many of our researchers that the impact criteria/frameworks used in REF 2014 were formulated with the model of science research too much in mind. The varied societal benefits of arts and humanities research can be particularly complex to measure and evidence, and there is often a much less linear relationship between impact and the underpinning research which are often strongly intertwined. We would like methodologies for evaluation of impact in these fields to be explored and cultivated further: in this regard, the AHRC’s self-evaluation guidance and resources are a useful point of reference. Having noted these challenges, it is reassuring that in practice the impact of arts and humanities did not seem to be disadvantaged by the REF 2014 process. We trust that any future revisions to the definition and assessment of impact are appropriately sympathetic to the kinds of work that happen across the arts and humanities.

It would also be desirable to review some of the REF 2014 constraints to enable a wider range of impact to be reported. For example, the insistence on linking a specific research finding to particular outcomes prevented submissions from describing how an aggregated body of more diffuse research findings (common in the arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines) has led to their authors becoming turn-to authorities by policy-makers nationally and internationally, and exerting clear effects on specific areas of public life. This seems such a major return on taxpayer investment that it is perverse to exclude it from recognition as a form of impact; it also risks incentivising universities to discourage such forms of activity in favour of narrower and in some cases arguably less powerful activities).

We would also ask that consideration is given to associating impact with individuals rather than primarily with institutions, as was the case in REF 2014 which required that the underpinning research was undertaken at the institution submitting the ICS. This meant that staff who had spent considerable time and effort at their present institution on developing impact from findings generated while they were elsewhere could not report this within an ICS submitted by their new institution. If this requirement continues in future REFs, both staff and their current institutions will be de-motivated from maximising the impact of their previous research and will focus instead on generating new research from which future impact can be derived and credited to their current institution. This is presumably not an outcome desired by either HEFCE, BIS, or RCUK, nor by the researcher or universities. We feel strongly that researchers should be able to ‘port’ impactful research in the same way as they do their submissible research outputs. This will have several benefits:

* Universities will be more incentivised to invest in bringing together research groups which work on related and evolving challenges, and in the institutional infrastructure to maximise the impact of these;
* Staff mobility will be enhanced, creating a more dynamic, successful, and impactful research culture nationally and internationally

Finally, and related to our discussion of the importance of research-led teaching in response to question 9 below, we suggest giving recognition to the broader educational impact of research where this influences the career outcomes of students and the ways in which they go on to shape society. For example, an academic’s body of research may lead them to write a major teaching textbook with wide take-up and professional influence. In the present articulation of impact this cannot be recognized because there is not a specific link between one particular research finding and pedagogical or professional practices. It is hugely problematic for such developments if researchers are in effect deterred from making such society-shaping contributions because they are less valuable to their own career progression than other forms of impact.

**Environment.** There is a view that the current method of reporting for the environment section needs to be much tighter, with specific requirements, so that parity of assessment can be improved. This is not suggesting a bureaucratic uniformity that stifles an energetic, creative and rigorous response, but at present it feels unwieldy and arguably too biased towards an ability to write compelling narrative.

1. If REF is mainly a tool to allocate QR at institutional level, what is the benefit of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF 2014, or in having returns linking outputs to particular investigators? 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?

We would welcome institution-based measures. We believe that a healthy institutional research culture relies on people from different disciplines working together on common university-wide research agendas. It would be really positive if this were better recognised by the REF. In this context, there would be significant benefit to aggregating impact case studies at institutional level (i.e. for REF to base the number of ICSs required on the total staff fte submitted from across the institution, and for the submitted ICSs to be from across the institution as a whole rather than being artificially linked to specific UoAs).

### Section 2

While the primary purpose of REF is QR resource allocation, data collected through the REF and results of REF assessments can also inform disciplinary, institutional and UK-wide decision making.

1. What use is made of the information gathered through REF in decision making and strategic planning in your organisation? What information could be more useful? Does REF information duplicate or take priority over other management information?

Goldsmiths has now reviewed all of our REF 2014 submissions in light of the outcomes, and this has developed our understanding of issues such as what is deemed to constitute excellence in research outputs, impact and environment. The information gathered during the REF process itself has enhanced our understanding of departmental outputs, and stimulated thinking about how our research could be better structured and encouraged. It complements our other management information in informing the development of our future department and university research strategies.

Furthermore, the REF process and outcomes have been instrumental in shining a spotlight on critically important issues of diversity (in particular gender, race, and age/career stage) on research achievements and the barriers which must be addressed institutionally and across the sector in order to ensure not only equality of opportunity but also the continued thriving of UK research. As one direct consequence, we are now actively engaging with the broadened Athena Swan framework.

The QR revenue awarded to each Goldsmiths submission is allocated to the budgets of our academic departments in proportion to the staff numbers they have contributed to each submission. This transparency of allocation is used in financial and strategic planning.

1. What data should REF collect to be of greater support to Government and research funders in driving research excellence and productivity?

Here, the evaluation of research culture on an institutional level could be useful again. We could gather information about medium and large-scale collaborations, viewed as collaborations, rather than as a collection of outputs, assigned to individual researchers. We are especially keen at Goldsmiths to promote a culture of a collective endeavour for our research so this would help.

Additional indices, which could be of specific benefit, include:

* Measures of international connectivity and networks – for example, funding from international sources, jointly authored research outputs, international research collaborations
* Career destinations and impacts of PGR students (e.g. which sectors they progress to, utilising their research training to societal benefit)

Section 3

The incentive effects of the REF shape academic behaviour, such as through the introduction of the impact criteria.

1. How might the REF be further refined or used by Government to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours such as promoting interdisciplinary research, collaboration between universities, and/or collaboration between universities and other public or private sector bodies?

We recognise that there has been a genuine desire and attempt to support interdisciplinary research in the UK (evidenced for example by calls from RCUK calls specifically welcoming interdisciplinary approaches). There is clearly a recognition that interdisciplinary research is a critical component of sustaining the depth, breadth and quality of UK research activity. However, there is a strong feeling at Goldsmiths that the strict disciplinary boundaries of subpanels are problematic for the assessment of work that is based on the interplay of different types of research and impact from different disciplines.

We also recognise that the flexibility and sensitivity of evaluation afforded by the process of cross-referring is helpful. We believe that allowing different outputs of a single individual to be submitted directly to different sub-panels might further enhance this. We recognise that in some cases this might lead to the same basic research being evaluated twice, from different points of view, and that this issue would need to be addressed.

It is often the case that the real value of truly interdisciplinary work is frequently found not in any particular discipline but in the cross-fertilisation that comes from the interaction. The view that understanding interdisciplinarity is complex reflects the Nurse report’s recognition that: *“Assessments of more multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary proposals will need a wider range of reviewer expertise, as well as individuals with experience of working in these more complex projects.”* We are unsure how much individual panels can be expected to know about the nature and importance of interdisciplinary research. Including specific members whose remit was to ensure that excellence in interdisciplinary research would be promoted sensitively would be extremely helpful in acknowledging quality. Relatedly, we suggest that this might be better captured than at present if the next REF appointed a group of specialists in Interdisciplinarity to whom relevant outputs could be referred for evaluation over and above that provided by discipline-specific panels.

For institutions like Goldsmiths committed to interdisciplinarity where staff work across departmental boundaries, it was difficult in REF 2014 to decide whether individual staff should be entered (a) in a departmentally-based submission to the UoA most closely aligned with their individual discipline, requesting cross-referral of specific outputs to other relevant UoAs; or (b) in the submission to a different UoA. The upside of the latter approach is that individual outputs may be more likely to be considered by the most appropriate panel, but the downside is loss of the sense of the environmental mix and the research culture at departmental and institutional level. We also had the impression that cross-referrals were not especially welcomed by some panels.

Section 4

Previous studies have focused on the costs of REF with respect to the time and resources needed for the submission and assessment processes. The Review is also interested in views and any associated evidence that the REF influences, positively or negatively, the research and career choices of individuals, or the development of academic disciplines. It is also interested in views on how it might encourage institutions to `game-play’ and thereby limit the aggregate value of the exercise.

1. In your view how does the REF process influence, positively or negatively, the choices of individual researchers and / or higher education institutions? What are the reasons for this and what are the effects? How do such effects of the REF compare with effects of other drivers in the system (e.g. success for individuals in international career markets, or for universities in global rankings)? What suggestions would you have to restrict gaming the system?

One of the greatest challenges for future REFs is how to reflect and support the following statement from the Nurse report (p. 9):

 *``vi. Diversity should be protected in researchers, approaches and locations – recognising that novel approaches and solutions to sometimes emerge more readily outside the mainstream. The best research should be funded wherever it is found.’’*

The current REF process tends to move people towards conservative choices of topics and, even more so, “safe” choices of publication venue. Many institutions are more confident submitting publications from journals with high reputations than any other kind of output. A positive consequence of this is, potentially, an overall increase in the number of British publications in internationally highly esteemed journals. However, a very significant downside is that we become more conservative as research institutions which invest in orthodox but unimaginative activities and publications that have predictable short to medium term academic and/or societal impact. We want to do everything we can to support the diversity in research to which Nurse alludes. In order to do so, it is critical that universities are supported by a REF process which builds in recognition and reward for such characteristics to offset or balance intrinsic orthodoxy and conservatism in the UK research community.

A great benefit of the REF process and evaluations is the way it raises the international reputation of UK universities individually and as a sector, enabling us to attract strong researchers and students from across the world. This is achieved in part directly through the information provided in REF profiles and in part through their contribution to/influence on other tables and ranking systems. In many cases, the REF data are among the most robust and meaningful contributors to such tables.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that in the current system of linking impact with research carried out at an institution seems over-dependent on the model of the fixed science lab, and is inappropriate for much work being done in the AHSS, which is far more dependent on individual research initiatives: an immediate consequence is that it favours long-established staff over ECRs and discourages mobility.

1. In your view how does the REF process influence the development of academic disciplines or impact upon other areas of scholarly activity relative to other factors? What changes would create or sustain positive influences in the future?

The REF process, in motivating the development of focused and often collaborative research strategies, can be productive in enabling institutions to recruit and motivate talented researchers able to contribute strongly to disciplinary and inter-disciplinary developments. Having said this, as previously noted Goldsmiths has particular concerns, given our disciplinary profile and our interdisciplinary orientation, with the status and evaluation of practice-based research and with measures for dealing with interdisciplinary research. With respect to ensuring effective recognition of practice-based research, it is impossible to overstate the importance of this to the UK’s creative and cultural industries – a growing field in which the UK is an international leader and which generates major revenue for the country.

There is widespread apprehension within Goldsmiths as well as more broadly within the academy that future REFs might over-privilege applied research to the detriment of ‘blue skies’ critical and theoretical research which can ultimately yield some of the greatest and most influential, life-changing, knowledge and insights. We urge very careful consideration of this balance.

### Section 5

Much of REF focuses on the retrospective analysis of success achieved by institutions either through output or impact. Yet the resources provided anticipate continued success based on that track record. Are there means of better addressing forward-looking institutional plans and priorities, and how these might feed in to national policy?

1. How can the REF better address the future plans of institutions and how they will utilise QR funding obtained through the exercise?

Consideration could be given to designing a set of questions concerned with the overall institutional environment and strategies, and with associated future plans. If intelligently framed, such questions could elicit responses which would contextualise the institution’s separate submissions to different UoAs and which might also be the basis for an element of QR funding. In many ways this would be similar to what is increasingly required of institutions when bids are made for major competitive funding awards including platform and programme grants, large European grants and doctoral training centres for example. This could have the positive effect of having institutions plan their research priorities for the next five years which might enable even greater collaboration between HE and non-HE institutions.

### Final thoughts

The Review is keen to hear of creative ideas and insights and to be open in its approach.

1. Are there additional issues you would like to bring to the attention of the Review?

We would like to see each of the REF and the TEF take aspects of the other into account. We are worried that we may be heading for conflicting, competitive criteria. This would be a pity as we view research-led teaching as one of the principal activities of a modern university and we would like to see its importance captured in any national assessment exercise. For example, teaching and the nurturing of future researchers represents a significant element of impact itself. Often interlinked research and teaching projects involve working with outside agencies of different kinds in richly symbiotic relationships. While we understand that the current funding mechanisms have to maintain some separation between the modes of allocation, it would be greatly to the national benefit if links and support mechanisms were made much more explicit.

As we reported in our response to the green paper we feel strongly that it is important that institutions do not lose sight of the holistic picture of how research and teaching are interdependent. Teaching is good at Goldsmiths because it is research-led and informed by the cutting edge knowledge production in the process of development. Similarly involvement of students in research generates ideas and new directions as well as consolidates critical analysis and skills development taught in the formal classroom. Moreover, there are socioeconomic benefits of this interdependency to both students’ learning and the public good more generally.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge receipt of individual responses unless you tick the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply X

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