Only responses received through the online form will be reviewed and included in our analysis.

Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework

This Word version of the response form is available to help respondents prepare responses before submitting them through the online form. Do not respond to the consultation using this Word form. Only responses received through the online form will be reviewed and included in our analysis.

1. Respondent details

Responses to this consultation are invited from any organisation, group or individual with an interest in research or research assessment. We will publish an analysis of the consultation responses. We may publish individual responses to the consultation in the summary. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the relevant Freedom of Information Acts across the UK. Responses to this consultation are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Please note that each question has a limit of 500 words.

Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of

- [ ] As an individual
- [ ] Higher education institution
- [ ] Subject association or learned society
- [X] Representative body
- [ ] Department or research group
- [ ] Business
- [ ] Charity
- [ ] Public sector organisation
- [ ] Other

Please provide the name of your organisation

UK Research Staff Association. The UK Research Staff Association provides a collective voice for research staff (those employed primarily to undertake research) across the UK through influencing policy and supporting researcher communities. We are supported by Vitae.

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The responses to this consultation were informed through a national survey of research staff disseminated through UKRSA research staff and researcher developer networks. 53 responses were collected from individual researchers and research staff groups from across the UK.

5. Staff

7. Do you have any comments on the proposal to use HESA cost centres to map research-active staff to UOAs and are there any alternative approaches that should be considered?

How this would capture individuals whose fixed-term contracts had ended during the REF period is not clear from the consultation and should be taken into consideration.

There is concern amongst research staff that this would lead to reclassification of staff either in terms of those that institutions report to HESA (i.e. research assistants no longer reported as research active) or in terms of staff being moved onto non-research contracts with potential negative impacts on the career prospects of those seeking academic careers.

8. What comments do you have on the proposed definition of 'research-active' staff described in paragraph 43?

It is recognised that this proposal will likely capture individuals employed as research assistants. Whilst recognition of research assistants' contribution to research excellence is welcomed, there is concern that the changes proposed will have a detrimental effect on job security, particularly for early career staff and contract staff at all levels.

The consultation text discusses a 'measure of independence', however without a definition of how this will work it is difficult to respond to its impact. It was felt that leaving decisions on an individual's research independence to an institution might lead to detrimental effects on job security. Measuring independence will be complex, however job titles alone would not be sufficient, suggestions included spine point pay scales and/or HERA definitions. Contribution to outputs was also suggested, however there is concern this could lead to manipulation of authorships that may be detrimental to junior researchers in favour of more senior academics.

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The specific concerns raised about the possibility of the inclusion of research assistants and more junior researchers in REF2021 were:

- Many earlier career researchers (research assistants, research fellows and junior academics) are employed on fixed-term contracts. If individuals on fixed-term contracts were to become eligible for REF there is a high level of concern that institutions may 'game' the system using these contracts in order to artificially reduce the numbers of those returnable to REF and hence increase the ratio of outputs generated to number of active research staff. Possibilities raised were:
    - Refusal of contract renewal near to REF deadlines
    - Contracts cut short
    - Redefinition of contracts/ redeployment to non-REF returnable roles

    It was felt that a measure of fixed-term vs permanent contracts would be needed to ensure institutions do not use this to game the system, for instance reporting on the numbers employed on these contracts and how this changes over time.

- There may be pressures on individuals that are not appropriate to the role/level and job security could become solely linked to research outputs
- Inclusion of greater numbers of staff (or application of a measure of independence) would increase the cost and complexity of REF
- Tensions may arise between senior academics and junior staff in relation to attribution of outputs

10. What are your comments on the issues described in relation to portability of outputs, specifically:

10a. Is acceptance for publication a suitable marker to identify outputs that an institution can submit and how would this apply across different output types?

This would not be a suitable marker in the case of early career researchers where they may have worked at multiple institutions during the production of an output.

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10c. Would non-portability have a negative impact on certain groups and how might this be mitigated?

Research staff are concerned about the 'transfer-window' hiring which took place during the previous REF, however they also feel removing the portability could negatively impact their career prospects as outputs are a key factor in hiring decisions. While it is difficult to predict exactly what new hiring trends any changes would precipitate, those who are most likely to be affected are those making the transition into their first independent position and those who were hired before the previous REF on a tenure-track basis. If outputs remain with institutions, there is a concern that there is less incentive for institutions to keep these fixed-term staff on in the future.

It was noted that it might be difficult to truly attribute where an output was generated for early career researchers that have moved institutions due to a number of short fixed-term contracts. It may also encourage researchers to hold back publications until they move to another employer.

Possible compromises that could be:

- Individuals on fixed-term contracts are able to take their outputs with them, whereas those produced by those on permanent contracts would stay with their institutions
- The outputs of those who were not returned to REF2014 remain portable
- Outputs can be counted at both the institution where they were generated and the new institution. This would result in 'double-counting', but this is already present when co-authors at different universities submit the same output. However, to alleviate this a weighting (50:50) could be used.

13. What comments do you have on the definition of research assistants?

The term 'research assistant' is confusing as it has a number of different meanings and is used as a job title for different career stages in different contexts. UKRSA recommends the term 'research staff' as used within the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

Responses also related to this question are included within Question 7 and 8.

6. Collaboration

15. What are your comments in relation to better supporting collaboration between academia and organisations beyond higher education in REF 2021?

In general research staff are positive about this proposal, collaboration between academia and organisations beyond HE is thought to bring wide-ranging benefits to both research and research staff careers. It is an important aspect of research that is not necessarily captured through research outputs alone.

Concerns were raised amongst research staff that the differences between different disciplines must be recognised to not disadvantage any and that this may cause 'basic' research to become less valued. A robust method for assessing these collaborations would be needed however.

34b. Do you have suggestions of data already held by institutions that would provide panels with a valuable insight into the research environment?

In general research staff appear to be in favour of these proposals and felt the aspects covered were important measures of the research environment. However, it was felt that a number of important aspects were not included. Aspects that were not covered but that UKRSA supports in order to give a true assessment of the research environment are:

- Measures of equality and diversity (race, gender, etc) at all levels, however this should include more granular data than institutional level to ensure pockets of bad practice cannot be hidden. Athena Swan awards could be used to assess this. PRES/CROS/PIRLS would also provide metrics around this, although survey results should be used with care.

- Indications of overall staff wellbeing/mental health/satisfaction/healthy work life balance, and the structures/activities in place to support these. Staff satisfaction surveys or PRES/CROS/PIRLS results could be used to assess aspects of this.

- Staff development opportunities for all career stages, however this is particularly important in relation contract research staff who are in transitory positions and in need of career development support. Attainment of the EU HR Excellence in Research award could be used as a simple way of assessing this. Since the ending of Roberts funding compliance with the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers has become a decreasing priority for institutions, however the situation for the researchers has not changed.

- Measure of internal collaborations

- Measure of contracted research staff vs permanent research staff

- Metrics/information around career progression of staff (including contract research staff) such as retention/promotion statistics and career destinations of PhDs and post-doctoral researchers

- Support and representation for all levels of staff such as union activities and postgraduate/research staff associations

There is concern that a heavy reliance on metrics will not report on the qualitative aspects and will create an increased administrative burden to tick boxes but not benefit research.

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10. Institutional level assessment

38. What are your views on the introduction of institutional-level assessment of impact and environment?

In general, research staff were in favour of this proposal, however concerns and issues were raised.

- There is concern that the current proposed criteria will reward campus development over staff development

- The assessment must be able to reward large and small institutions equally as we have the ability to take into account the different disciplinary make-ups of institutions.

- Care must be taken to not unnecessarily increase the administrative burden of REF

- It was felt that the use of output-led metrics in conjunction with the short-term nature of many academic contracts could lead to detrimental effects on early career researchers, including in relation to their mental health and well-being

39. Do you have any comments on the factors that should be considered when piloting an institutional-level assessment?

We have suggested a range of factors in question 7 that we would like to see included in the institutional-level assessment.

- Clear guidance should be given to the assessment panel with respect to how any metrics/measures should be used and the intention behind their inclusion. Metrics such as grant income should not take precedence over those around staff wellbeing, mental health and development.

- The language around post-doctoral staff should be clear and unambiguous to ensure all postdoctoral staff/research assistants/research associates/research fellows are included. UKRSA recommends the term 'research staff' or 'contract research staff' be defined and used to ensure inclusivity.

- Metrics around the numbers of PhDs and (postdoctoral) research staff on its own is not an adequate reflection of the research environment, information about the resources and support structures in place for their community should be included to give a fairer reflection.

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13. Other

44. Are there proposals not referred to above, or captured in your response so far, that you feel should be considered? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

Research staff are concerned with the idea that the recommendations will increase casualization of the workforce in an area where it is already difficult to get a full time position.

Others have mentioned concerns about how involved research staff would become and how time consuming REF is. As the main source of research within a University research staff would not want to spend less time on research due to increased administration.

There are also some thoughts that measures of staff satisfaction, work/life balance and parental leave need to be included as these may decrease outputs slightly but can greatly improve the work environment and diversity.

14. Contact details

If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

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