

Humanities and Social Science (HSS) Learned Society and Subject Association Meeting on 27 October 2009

A note of the discussion on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) proposals

Sir Adam Roberts, President, The British Academy

In his opening welcome, the President thanked participants for attending what was planned to be the first of a series of biannual meetings of HSS learned societies and subject associations. The topic of the first meeting was on the HEFCE consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which proposed new arrangements for the assessment and funding of research assessment in UK higher education institutions. The President welcomed David Sweeney (HEFCE Director, Research, Innovation and Skills) and Graeme Rosenberg (REF Manager) to the meeting. The meeting aimed to discuss both the areas of consensus across the humanities and social sciences, as well as the areas of difference.

David Sweeney, HEFCE, Director, Research, Innovation and Skills

The main points raised in his presentation included:

- In the face of future funding pressures and challenges, it was essential that the research community could demonstrate the value of the state's investment in research. It was in the interests of the whole research community to work constructively with HEFCE on the development of the new framework.
- Peer review would be the primary method of assessment in the new framework.
- The exercise would focus on the identification of excellence, with the greatest recognition being given to the units with excellent research activity as measured by outputs (research publications and other outputs) and research environment (the extent to which the environment supports a continuing flow of excellent research and its effective dissemination and application).
- The exercise aimed to capture the success of all disciplines, driving selective funding to reward both achievement demonstrated and prospective success.
- The proposals aimed to ensure that there were no disincentives to those whose work was applied.
- 'Impact' was defined broadly as the contribution to social, cultural, economic, public policy, environment and quality of life.
- HEFCE had no intention of micromanaging the conduct of research in universities.

- HEFCE recognized that there were difficulties of measuring impact, such as time lags, attribution and corroboration. It had therefore set up the impact pilot exercise to test and develop the proposals to assess impact. The decisions on the assessment of impact and its weighting would be taken in the light of the consultation exercise and the pilot outcomes.
- HEFCE aimed to introduce greater consistency across the exercise, and proposed to set up a REF Steering Group with oversight of the conduct of the exercise.

Dr Graeme Rosenberg, HEFCE REF Manager

In this presentation, Graeme drew attention to:

- the proposal to reduce the number of main panels from 15 to 4, with one main panel for the arts and humanities and one for the social sciences.
- The proposal to reduce the number of sub-panels from 67 to 30, by bringing together certain disciplines into the same unit of assessment.

Professor Albert Weale, British Academy Vice-President, Research

The main points raised in his presentation included:

- In the last ten years the science budget had doubled in real terms over its 1997 level.
- The government was now asking what the public benefits of this investment in the research base had been.
- Pigou distinguished between light and fruit. From one point of view, the distinction suggests a role for ‘impact’; on the other hand the distinction also presupposes that there are disciplines where light is more important than fruit.
- Are there disciplines where it is unrealistic to expect impact, and where the attempt to show impact is likely to distract time and energy that would be better spent actually doing academic research?
- How broadly should impact be defined? There is a clear need to signal the full range of benefits that can fall under the heading of impact.
- Some clarity could come in this discussion from making a link to the idea of charitable purposes. British charity law prescribes a list of purposes that are charitable, including the advancement of understanding under various heads, and also requires that there be public benefit. The list of purposes includes such things as the advancement of religion, the promotion of sustainable development and the strengthening of citizenship.

- Impact should not be restricted to public benefit in the UK. For some disciplines (e.g. Development Studies) their impacts will be international and should not be restricted to the UK.

There followed presentations on the assessment of impact on a discipline basis.

Professor Vanessa Harding, Royal Historical Society

Professor David Feldman, Society of Legal Scholars

Professor Helen Beebee, British Philosophical Association

Professor John Brewer, British Sociological Association

Professor Nick Rickman, Conference of Heads of University Departments of Economics

The main points raised in the presentations included:

- The importance of encouraging researchers to explore ways in which their research might have wider non-academic impacts.
- Questions were raised as to whether REF was the right place to develop incentives to encourage researchers to exploit the potential of their work to have wider impacts.
- Unevenness of impact in certain disciplines and sub-fields. There was a concern that this might privilege certain areas at the expense of others.
- Sometimes impact might take the form of enabling policy makers and others to rethink proposed plans, and may prevent poorly conceived plans from being implemented.
- As HSS research was world leading, concerns were raised that the REF impact proposals should not unintentionally damage the internationally renowned quality of research undertaken in these disciplines.
- Questions were raised about the way in which impact would relate to the unit of assessment, the role of the users, and whether the REF was the right place to assess impact.
- Concerns were raised about the exclusion of both teaching related impacts and the impact that research in one discipline may have on other disciplines.
- Questions were also raised about the difficulties of capturing the link between reputation and impact.

Breakout Group 1 – Convenor: Iain McLean, University of Cambridge

3 areas were discussed:

1) 25 percent weighting for impact

On p. 19, paragraphs 83 and 84 of the submission, it was pointed out that there was a contradiction in the statement on impact and environmental weighting. The panel called for clarity on this.

There were questions about the role of impact before arriving at a unit. Clarity was sought over whether this would lead to double counting.

There was a call for panel specific criteria for impact, which led to questions about whether this needs to be set at 25 percent across all panels. It was argued, for example, that for Mega Panel D, a universal 25 percent weighting would be impractical.

2) International impact

It was noted that some impact must be international by its nature (eg, development studies), whilst other impact is necessarily local (as noted by the English place name society). Clarity was called for over where international impact was assessed.

The statement ‘world leading’ was not written into the statement on four-star impact, which was in general unclear (p. 17).

3) Audit and verification

It was pointed out that there were problems with asking users to verify impact (p. 13-15) and again it was argued that because of this, 25 percent was too high here.

It was noted that the nature of users is very different (and includes groups as various as the public, Rolls Royce and library users).

There were also practical questions about verification, especially with international users, who also have time constraints.

Breakout Group 2 – Convenor: Michael Jubb, Director, Research Information Network

The 25% figure

- It was agreed it was not worth arguing against “impact”, but the 25% figure of funding allocated on impact was deemed up for negotiation
- There is currently not a robust enough framework to assess what percentage it ought to be
- The issue of judging departments on case studies when groups often work individually and there is collaborative work across universities and other bodies was raised
- It was suggested that there is an implicit assumption in the case study approach that the case studies look at group research and not individual research

- The uniformity of the 25% figure, or indeed whatever percentage is decided upon, could pose a problem.
- It was said in small departments, which are common in HSS disciplines where individual research is dominant, a figure as large as 25% could place a lot of pressure on individuals.

Defining “Impact”

- Where does the responsibility of defining impact lie? Is it with users, producers or somewhere more centrally?
- It was asked can “impact” be sensibly defined by either users or producers
- The definition of impact potentially includes a very wide range, especially as it is to span so many disciplines
- If it is defined in a very wide way, it was said it could be quite similar to the esteem measure of the RAE, as there is a link between esteem and quality of outputs
- As teaching is explicitly excluded from impact, the question was posed as to where the boundary between research impact and teaching is to be drawn. Would producing a resource pack for schools, then, constitute “impact,” whilst a textbook for undergraduates would not as it is classed as teaching?

The Three Key Indicators

- The collaboration point was deemed tricky and likely to be a particular problem where the profession is highly concentrated in the academy
- In disciplines where the concentration of professionals is in the academy the definition of “users” becomes problematic
- The list of indicators runs the risk of hardening into a definitive one
- It may discourage excellent research where impact is difficult to measure. The example was given of an excellent philosophy department pursuing policy because it is more measurable in impact terms, and even if it is excellent it is to the detriment of research in other, more academic fields like metaphysics.

Breakout Group 3 – Convenor: Terry Lamb, University of Sheffield

A uniform impact measure

- While it was agreed that all disciplines had impact, it was thought that it might be easier for certain disciplines to demonstrate and provide evidence of their impacts than others. For these reasons, it was suggested that a sliding scale of ‘impact’ could be introduced. In discussion, the group agreed that there was a risk that the government might choose to fund only those disciplines at the high end of the scale expense of those at the lower end, in the mistaken belief that disciplines at the lower end of the scale did not have as much impact as those at the top end.

The link between ‘impact’ and reputation

- The Group noted that ‘impact’ was often linked to an individual researcher’s standing in the community and track-record, rather than a single piece of work. This raised a number of practical difficulties about how impact might best be captured.

International impact

- The Group noted the importance of capturing international and global ‘impacts’. For some disciplines, international ‘impact’ would be the gold standard, for others, regional and local impacts would be more appropriate.

Defining long-term impact

- While the group was pleased that the consultation recognized the difficulties of time lags between research outputs and impact, it agreed that the period of time involved – the consultation talked about the impact of work undertaken possibly 10 to 15 years earlier – would also create a number of practical difficulties, including the drafting of assessment criteria for long-term impact.

Timetable

- Concerns were raised about the REF timetable, as the findings from the pilot impact exercise would not be known until mid-2010, which would leave the research community with little time to prepare for the REF exercise.

Dr Robin Jackson, Chief Executive and Secretary , The British Academy

In his closing remarks, Dr Jackson thanked all the participants for their stimulating and thoughtful contributions. A clear message that had emerged from the meeting was the importance of working with HEFCE to develop an assessment system that all would have confidence in.

He hoped that the meeting would be the first of a series of twice yearly meetings, where HSS learned societies and subject associations could meet to share common issues of concern. Participants would be invited to comment via an anonymous on-line survey on how useful they had found the meeting, and to suggest topics for future meetings.