



UKRI consultation on initial decisions for REF 2028
**Response from the Chartered Association of
Business Schools**

6th October 2023

Consultation on initial decisions for REF 2028 – Chartered ABS response

Details of submitting organisation

Q1 to Q4 relate to details of the organisation submitting the consultation response.

Volume measure

The funding bodies propose to draw staff data directly from HESA to calculate the volume measure, using an average staff FTE over Academic Years (AYs) 25/26 and 26/27 (piloted in AY 24/25) (Annex A, paragraphs 4-7).

Q5. What practical challenges may institutions face in implementing these changes?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: Although our members broadly support the continuation of the principle that the inclusion of staff outputs in REF will be based on the extent of their research contributions, there is concern that using the HESA Staff Record to designate staff as research-active might lead to the exclusion of junior academics who want to be included in the REF.

The proposal also raises the question as to whether ‘research inactive’ status retains longevity across the entire REF 2028 period if the staff member was only inactive for the years 2024/25 and 2025/26 but was research active in other years. Use of the HESA Staff Record will be challenging because the HESA academic function field might not align properly with university HR systems. An additional challenge will be recording staff changes, especially during periods of high turnover, and fully understanding what and who counts.

Careful consideration is needed as to any unintended consequences of the proposal to base the volume measure on the outputs of staff designated as research-active. It might be detrimental to the creation of effective research environments if staff can’t publish if they are not on either a research-only or research and teaching contract. Our members would not want to see a divide between those who are given time and resources for research and those who are not, thus impacting career progression.

Q6. How might the funding bodies mitigate against these challenges?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: Institutions need clear practical guidance on requirements for returns to the HESA Staff Record, how these will align with the research-active designation used by the REF, and on timeframes for calculations of FTE.

Q7. What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics or other underrepresented groups?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: The concerns of our member schools about the unintended consequences of staff being designated as research inactive in the HESA Staff Record extend to specific groups of staff whose careers may be adversely impacted. The proposed approach runs the risk of unfairly disadvantaging certain groups such as those who may have had career breaks (e.g. parental leave) or who have caring responsibilities during the academic years 2024/25 and 2025/26. It is feasible that a temporary period of illness and/or other career break might impact on the specific period in which the HESA Staff Record will be used to make the determination of research active status and that this may not be reflective of the individual’s status during the rest of the REF assessment period.

The consensus view of our members is that because the proposed approach for submitting outputs to REF 2028 doesn't set any maximum on the number of outputs per research active staff, there is a significant risk that REF submissions will be increasingly concentrated on the outputs of established research 'stars'. This would be the opposite of Research England's wish to sever the link between research outputs and individual researchers. The proposal may serve to increase the status of established research staff whilst reducing the opportunities for other research staff to have their outputs included in their institution's REF submission. In our view this would not be a desirable situation.

It would be concerning if certain members of staff, including those with protected characteristics or from underrepresented groups, have their opportunity to undertake research constrained in this way. This would conflict with Research England's focus on improving research culture and may have long-term harmful effects on career development as some researchers would not develop the skills or track record required for their career development goals. We need to avoid a situation where the arrangements for REF 2028 perpetuate existing disadvantages in relation to research opportunities in HE. Research England should consider appropriate safeguards to mitigate this risk from occurring as part of REF 2028, including EDI monitoring.

Output Submission

The funding bodies propose to fully break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions (Annex A, paragraphs 12-18).

Q8. What impact would these changes have on institutions in preparing output submissions? For example, what may be the unintended consequences of allowing the submission of outputs produced by those on non-academic or teaching-only contracts?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: Whilst the new approach may enable non-research staff who collaborate in laboratory or other settings to form part of the return, such division of labour is not applicable in C17 disciplines. There is therefore a consensus that the proposed approach to determining which outputs are included in a submission would not lead to the inclusion of a significant number of outputs from non-research staff.

The requirement that the submitted outputs must be produced by anyone employed by the institution on a minimum 0.2 FTE contract for at least six months in the REF assessment period arguably sets a low bar which could lead to gaming of the system. It is also unclear how the specified period of at least six months would be accurately captured by the HESA Staff Record – this should be further articulated. We also need to know as soon as possible the exact dates covered by the REF assessment period.

The use of fractional appointments before the census date to improve REF performance has been raised before in relation to previous REF exercises but it is unclear if institutions were marked down in their environment statements in REF 2021 if there was clear evidence that this had occurred. The proposed arrangements for REF 2028 do not appear to be any more restrictive in relation to the use of fractional appointments for the purposes of gaming and more thought is needed.

Q9. Should outputs sole-authored by postgraduate research students be eligible for submission? If so, should this include PhD theses?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: Most of our members who were surveyed for our response to this consultation were against the inclusion in institutions' submissions of outputs sole-authored by

PGR students as they can't be considered employees of the institution and it would lead to additional complexity and perhaps unintended consequences. It's difficult to see how the inclusion of outputs from PGR students would benefit any stakeholder. It would be burdensome and complex, and students would instead be better served by an increase in research scholarship opportunities. There are also pastoral and welfare issues surrounding this idea as it could result in pressure on PhD students to submit outputs to REF. Having a greater focus on PGR students in the environment statement is a better alternative to including them in the REF.

Q10. What would be appropriate indicators of a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: The most recommended indicator of a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution by our survey respondents was 0.2 FTE for at least six months during the REF period, but several others suggested 0.3 FTE. However, to safeguard against the 'renting' of experienced researchers on short-term contracts for the purpose of inclusion in REF, there were several comments that additional evidence of a substantive link to the submitting institution should be provided.

Our members note that the consultation document does not make any proposal on the portability of outputs for REF 2028 and whether outputs produced by staff no longer at the institution would be eligible for submission. The consensus from our members is that the more flexible approach to portability used in REF 2021 was a significant improvement on REF 2014. As REF 2028 has the stated intention to sever the link between individuals and outputs it would be logical to assume that portability of outputs will be acceptable but clarification is needed as soon as possible.

Q11. Do the proposed arrangements for co-authored outputs strike the right balance between supporting collaboration and ensuring that assessment focuses on the work of the unit?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: The consensus view from our members is that these proposed arrangements seem sensible although we have concerns about the treatment of outputs based on inter-disciplinary research should the proposed change in staff eligibility requirements for REF 2028 proceed as articulated. If researchers from various disciplines are excluded, it could hinder collaboration and innovation, and therefore the production of inter-disciplinary research.

Furthermore, our members feel that business schools are inherently multidisciplinary spaces but that inter-disciplinary outputs received, on average, a lower GPA in REF 2021. There is therefore a significant concern about the risk/incentive to do so again at REF 2028. It was noted that the inclusion of the tick box to denote an inter-disciplinary output in submissions for REF 2021 did not seem to offer any significant benefit and it is questionable if the REF panels perceive inter-disciplinary outputs as positive.

Q12. Are there any further considerations around co-authored outputs that need be taken into account?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: No comment.

Impact Case Studies

The funding bodies propose to reduce the minimum number of impact case studies required to one. They also propose to revise the boundaries, including splitting the lowest boundary (Annex A, paragraph 33-37). The funding bodies are particularly keen to hear the views of institutions with

small units.

Q13. What will be the impact of reducing the minimum number to one?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: The proposal to reduce the minimum number of case studies from two to one is expected to have little impact on our members. The responses indicate that most have sufficiently large-scale research activity and therefore would submit more than one impact case study under the revised arrangement. The proposed change might make it easier for institutions with a smaller number of research contributing staff to make a submission under REF but it is unclear if it would result in stronger impact case studies.

Q14. What will be the impact of revising the thresholds between case study requirements?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: Members expect the revised thresholds for case study requirements to have a negligible impact but might give institutions making larger submissions a greater degree of focus in their research activity. It is likely that the reduced scope for an institution to showcase the full diversity of their impact will be balanced out by the advantage of more efficient use of resources.

Q15. To what extent do you support weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies submitted?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: A majority of responses to our survey on the consultation show support for the idea of weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies submitted, although it was noted that the current design seems somewhat arbitrary. The weighting of the impact statement decreases to 20% within the band of 40 to 59.99 FTE staff but is fixed for subsequent bands with no further decrease. The logic behind the design of the sliding scale needs further clarification.

The impact statement will have the benefit of enabling institutions to demonstrate the breadth and depth of impact beyond their impact case studies which will be more tightly defined in scope. However, for the impact statement to be a useful exercise there will need to be appropriate guidelines as to the content and structure.

Unit of Assessment

The funding bodies propose to retain the REF 2021 Unit of Assessment structure (Annex B). The funding bodies invite views from disciplinary communities and institutions on any disciplinary developments since REF 2021 that would require changes to be made to the UOA structure

Q16. If the UOA structure is relevant to you/your organisation, please indicate clearly any changes that you propose to the UOA structure and provide your rationale and any evidence to support your proposal.

Proposed Chartered ABS response: Our members are unanimous in the view that the UoA structure for Business & Management should remain unchanged. The panel must be broad by necessity due to the diverse range of fields covered within the Business & Management domain. It was noted that the potential for change to UoA structures is limited if people wish to compare results between different REF exercises.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The funding bodies intend to retain the statements on Covid impact that were used in REF 2021, and to require some consideration of how Covid impacts have been addressed in output selection as part of Codes of Practice.

Q17. What is your view on the proposed measures to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: We agree that REF 2028 should consider the effects of Covid-19 as the impact will have varied between research-active staff depending on specific circumstances. Researchers with teaching responsibility or who needed to provide childcare support during the pandemic might have had less time available for research and knowledge exchange. We received several comments that it is important that institutions highlight how Covid-19 affected their research-active staff and the measures adopted to support them during this period.

Q18. What other measures should the funding bodies consider to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: No further comments.

Cymraeg in HEFCW

Welsh and English are the official languages of Wales. HEFCW treats the Welsh and English languages on the basis of equality in the conduct of its public business in Wales. We recognise the important role higher education (HE) has in fulfilling the Welsh Government's vision for a bilingual Wales.

Q19. What positive or adverse effects will the proposals have on opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language and treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: No comments.

Q20. Could the proposals be changed to increase positive effects, or decrease adverse effects on opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language and treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

Proposed Chartered ABS response: No comments.

About the Chartered ABS

The Chartered ABS is the voice of the UK's business and management education sector and our members consist of 120 business schools and higher education providers across the UK, as well as affiliate stakeholders, corporate members and international partners. The UK's business and management education sector represents 1 in 5 university students and contributes £6.4bn to the UK economy. Its management students go on to lead global businesses and its entrepreneurs contribute to our dynamic economy. Its research has an impact across society and helps to turn our capacity for invention into viable businesses.