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Submitted to Research Excellence Framework 2028: issues for further consultation following the initial decisions
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Organisation/Institution:
Arts and Humanities Alliance

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Organisation/Institution

Volume Measure

5 What practical challenges may institutions face in implementing these changes?

This is an open text field:

This response brings together responses made directly to this consultation by some of our affiliates with feedback sent directly to AHA by other affiliates. Given the detailed and finely-argued nature of some of the responses you will have already received from organisations such as the British Philosophical Association, UK Council for Area Studies, and the joint responses from the University Council for Languages and the Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations UK, and from University English, the English Association and the Institute of English Studies, this response is deliberately brief, seeking primarily to indicate areas where there is general consensus among our affiliates.

Overall, AHA affiliates are supportive of the ethos of the changes proposed in relation to EDI, but very concerned that most proposals will actually open the gates to new forms of institutional 'game playing', and create more problems than they solve, all of which will likely impact disproportionately on the very groups you are seeking to help. They are particularly concerned about the amount of proposed changes and the limited time frame in which to implement them, with no scope for running trials first to see if they work and with much of the assessment period for REF 2028 already having elapsed.

With respect to volume measure, it is unclear that HESA data will make its calculation more accurate or reduce administrative burden. HEIs will still need to make decisions about which colleagues are entered under which HESA code and this may drive inconsistent and unhelpful behaviours. While moving to using an average staff FTE might seem beneficial as opposed to a single census date, it will inevitably also create significant extra work.

6 How might the funding bodies mitigate against these challenges?

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates would like to see clarification of key terms and rules as soon as possible if REF is to go ahead for 2028 in order to reduce volatility within HEIs and would overwhelmingly encourage postponement of the exercise to 2029 to allow for better consideration and understanding of the changes. Particularly with respect to volume, this data needs to be settled as early as possible, as, for smaller submissions, even small changes to volume can impact significantly on the shape of their submission (for example, with respect to number of ICS expected).

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

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates are concerned that the proposals around ways to measure volume will not have the desired results and that this may have overall negative consequences for EDI. HESA data is not neutral - HEIs still have to enter the data and have ample opportunity for 'gaming' the system at this stage. HESA codes also reflect traditional disciplines (primarily in relation to teaching rather than research) and colleagues whose work does not fit easily with such categorisations might be left out by risk-averse institutions. This may impact more on ECRs and others with protected characteristics whose work challenges academic traditions. We note, in particular, that there is not a HESA code for Area Studies.

Output Submission

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

This is an open text field:

Overall, AHA affiliates are not convinced that the proposed changes would have the desired effects - indeed, they may well work to worsen conditions for those with protected characteristics or other underrepresented groups. Affiliates do not believe that, particularly in disciplines and fields that traditionally rely on a model of single-authored publication, it will ever be possible to fully break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions. Allowing no minimum or maximum output per staff member submitted may look like a way to compensate for mitigating circumstances without having to deal with cumbersome bureaucratic processes, but who is included/excluded will still be known within institutions and will impact on career progression and self-esteem. Furthermore, risk-averse HEIs may be tempted to submit only the work of an increasingly small pool of 'research stars' and that which takes more traditional formats than that of ECRs and/or those with protected characteristics which may take different forms and actually be more clearly at the forefront of disciplines/areas, particularly in light of the decolonising agenda. None of these things would help improve EDI with respect to the REF.

9 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?

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates are very concerned that, overall, the proposed changes may lead to increased exploitation of existing staff on non-academic or teaching-only contracts who do research unpaid and in their own time, and less inclination of HEIs to offer research contracts as there will be less incentive to do so. It may also lead to increased volatility as key players are bought in on '0.2FTE 6 month' contracts to serve REF purposes only.

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

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates are united in their opposition to this proposal. While it might seem to be 'inclusive', it will inevitably lead to greater pressure being heaped on PGRs and it is unethical since universities will effectively be exploiting PGRs' unpaid labour.

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

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates did not feel that a '0.2FTE 6 month' contract was sufficient in order to evidence a 'demonstrable and substantive' link to a submitting institution and that 6 month contracts should not be incentivised. While cautious about the administrative burden that demonstrating substantive links might cause, a wider set of clearly-defined criteria that would serve this purpose would be helpful.

12 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?

This is an open text field:

In general, AHA affiliates see no issues with allowing co-authored outputs by researchers within the same unit to be submitted multiple times to the same UOA as well as to different UOAs where appropriate.

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

open text box:

While sole-authorship continues to be the norm in the Arts and Humanities, co-authored outputs are increasing, particularly in the light of the decolonising agenda, and, in some fields are including non-academic co-authors from the Global South. AHA affiliates are supportive of any measures that incentivise submitting such work that do not lead to exploitative behaviours by HEIs.

Impact Case Studies

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

This is an open text field:

This change is welcomed by AHA affiliates and will be a supportive measure for the many smaller departments that characterise the Arts and Humanities HE landscape.

Affiliates also welcome the removal of the need for evidence of minimum 2* quality underpinning research.

Affiliates are not supportive of the introduction of the criterion of 'rigour' alongside 'reach' and 'significance', finding that this will not work to directly assess impact. Affiliates also note that it is unfair to start making changes of this sort when the assessment period is already so far advanced and some ICS will have been worked on with only the extant criteria in mind, and hence data to support any new criterion will not necessarily have been collected.

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

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates believe that bigger departments will benefit disproportionately from the limit to the number of ICS at the top end and a standard ratio between FTE and ICS should be used instead.

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

This is an open text field:

There are different opinions in regard to this change. While most AHA affiliates find it a reasonable adjustment, others, particularly those that represent subjects that tend to make smaller submissions to the REF, are worried that greater weighting of the impact statement for those smaller submissions will have the effect of placing greater demands across all staff in those units with respect to impact, whereas large submissions can rely on a limited number of staff producing ICS to do most of the work for them.

Unit of Assessment

17 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.

This is an open text field:

AHA affiliates are generally happy with the UOA structure of REF2021 and the good working relationships that were established between panels in that exercise. They also caution against making any changes to UOA structure at this stage in the process - consideration of any changes to the nature of disciplines/fields can be addressed in the descriptors for the panels and careful consideration of who is selected to sit on panels. There is strong endorsement for the continued existence of UOA25 Area Studies and the Advisory Panel on Interdisciplinary Research to mitigate the heavily disciplinary nature of the underpinning structure of the exercise.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

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

This is an open text field:

This measure is endorsed by AHA affiliates; indeed, it is seen to be more important now, further downstream from the pandemic itself, but with the legacy of that period and the ongoing nature of Covid infections, long Covid, and impacts on mental health for academics and their families, all impacting on the environment in which we conduct research. The limits on travel for much of the current REF assessment period are also important to acknowledge for many researchers in arts and humanities, particularly in the fields of Languages, Cultures and Societies and Area Studies.

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

This is an open text field:

Many affiliates endorse reducing the average number of outputs per FTE of staff from 2.5 to 2 and to extending the assessment period by an additional year to take the ongoing nature of the Covid pandemic into account.

Some consideration of the impact of the war in Ukraine may need to be factored into the next REF.

Cymraeg in HEFCW

20 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?

This is an open text field:

21 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?

This is an open text field: