

## UCU member consultation on the Stern review of the Research Excellence Framework

### *Introduction*

In July, the independent review of the Research Excellence Framework – more commonly known as the [Stern review](#) - was published. The report proposes a series of changes to the next REF, planned for 2020/21. In our submission to the review, UCU called for a [fundamental review](#) of UK research policy and funding and for a renewed focus on staffing-related issues such as a reduction in the use of fixed-term contracts.

For many years we have pointed out that the REF and the RAE before it have had a largely detrimental impact on the higher education sector and on staff in particular: for example, increasing workload pressures, creating unreasonable performance expectations and exacerbating inequalities between different groups of staff. We have also highlighted the ways in which the RAE/REF have limited intellectual freedom and restricted the character, breadth and inter-disciplinarity of research. Judged on those terms, the Stern report is disappointing. For example, it is argued that the ‘HE sector would be poorer without it [the REF] and that largely the benefits far outweigh the costs’ (p.9)

At the same time, the Stern report supports UCU’s position on a number of technical policy issues. For example, it rules out the possibility of a metrics-*only* REF and proposes broadening out the notion of “research impact” to include its impact on teaching.

Moreover, some of the proposals in the report offer a firm basis for challenging the more damaging effects of the REF. For example, by proposing that all “research active” staff should be returned in the REF and introducing greater flexibility in the number of outputs per researcher, the report could lead to a more [inclusive process](#) for staff (and hopefully a broader and fairer system of evaluating research outputs).

### *Next steps*

But, as always, the devil will be in the detail. Over the next few months, governments and the funding councils will work on translating the principles of the Stern report into more detailed structures and procedures.

By the end of the year a formal consultation will be published, with decisions arising from the consultation published in the summer of 2017. This will then form the basis of the assessment criteria for the next REF in 2020/21.

In the meantime, the higher education sector has been busy discussing some of the [implications of the Stern proposals](#). *We are keen to hear from UCU members on all these issues, in particular the new proposals for evaluating outputs in the REF (see recommendations 1-3 below).*

### **Recommendation 1: “All research active staff should be returned in the REF” (p.19)**

This is the most far-reaching recommendation in the report.

Potentially, this change could lead to a less divisive and demoralising assessment process for academic staff – something that UCU has been demanding for many years.

But there’s still plenty of scope for institutions and departments to play the game of who is, and isn’t, “research active”. Above all, we are concerned that universities will look to pressurise people to change job classification, i.e. an [unintended consequence](#) is that it could lead to an increased incentive to move people to ‘teaching only’ contracts.

*Do you think that recommendation 1 is a step in the right direction? Will it lead to a less divisive and demoralising REF? Is it likely that your HEI (or department) will look to change contracts as a means to 'game' the new system?*

**Recommendation 2: Outputs should be submitted at Unit of Assessment level with a set average number per FTE but with flexibility for some faculty members to submit more and others less than the average (p.20)**

For the 2014 REF there was a fixed number of four submissions per researcher (with reductions for early career staff and for 'individual staff circumstances'). The Stern report recommends reducing the average number of submissions to two, while allowing flexibility of up to six outputs from some individuals.

One of the possible benefits is that it will reduce the [pressure to publish](#) and therefore the recommendation should be welcomed by many academic staff. However, it will be important to undertake an equality impact assessment of the proposal to end the 'individual staff circumstances' rule.

*Do you think that recommendation 2 is a step in the right direction? Will it "reduce the current consequences for morale of non-submission" and encourage "cohesiveness and productivity in the submitting unit" (p.20)? What are the possible implications for equality of ending the 'individual staff circumstances' rule?*

**Recommendation 3: "Outputs should not be portable" (p.21)**

Perhaps the most controversial part of the Stern report is the proposal to end the portability of research publications. For the next REF, Stern recommends that outputs should be submitted only by the institution where the output was generated. The purpose is to disincentivise "short-term and narrowly-motivated movement" across the sector.

On the one hand, the REF and the RAE before it has been criticised by UCU and others for creating a 'transfer market' of [research 'superstars'](#), brought in by institutions to boost their REF scores, and leaving other academics in the particular schools/ departments feeling marginalised. Specific concerns have been expressed about the impact of the REF 'transfer market' on [equal opportunities](#), [salary differentials](#) and [jobs](#).

On the other hand, a number of [academics](#) have expressed concerns about the impact of the non-portability proposal on career access, academic mobility and the 'ownership' of research. [Early career academics](#) on fixed-term contracts, in particular, are concerned that this new proposal fails to take into account their unique employment situation and will make it even harder for them to get their first permanent post.

*Do you think that recommendation 3 is a step in the right direction? For example, will it lead to institutions investing more in research potential and "encourage greater collaboration across the system" (p.21)? Or is it mainly an attempt to shift power away from individual academics in favour of the institution?*

*What about the position of early career researchers on fixed-term contracts? Should there be specific exemptions for this group of academic staff (e.g. publications produced by staff on temporary contracts should remain portable)? Or should there be portability of REF outputs for all academic staff (as occurred under the 2014 REF)?*

### **Recommendations 4-10 (pp.21-25)**

There are a number of other proposed changes to the structure of the REF, including the broadening of the research impact agenda (recommendation 7) and a new institutional level assessment of the research environment (recommendation 8).

*We would also welcome comments on these and any other recommendations in the Stern report.*

**Please can you send in any comments to Rob Copeland [rcopeland@ucu.org.uk](mailto:rcopeland@ucu.org.uk) by no later than 30 September?**