

**The Political Studies Association of the UK.
Response to the Research Excellence Framework 2028 consultation on
'Initial Decisions and Issues'
October 2023.**

1. Redesigning the UK's national research assessment exercise undoubtedly offers an opportunity to reshape the incentives within the research system, and to rethink what should be recognised and rewarded. The 'high level' decisions that were announced in June 2023 reflects a commitment to a more inclusive assessment exercise that should capture and reward a broader range of contributions to research, research infrastructure and research mobilisation. **The Political Studies Association (PSA) generally welcomes this shift in emphasis, especially in relation to promoting a positive research culture, rewarding a diversity of research outputs, acknowledging the role research enabling staff and an explicit emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion – but also has concerns in relation to the potential impact of a shift from individual to institutional performance for some members and Departments.** This document provides the response from the Political Studies Association of the UK to the REF2028 consultation - drawing upon a survey of PSA members and a national Heads of Department.
2. In drawing-up this response the PSA has been acutely aware of wider changes within the research, development and innovation ecosystem. Relevant recent reports include the [Grant Review of UKRI](#) (December 2021), the [Tickell Review of research bureaucracy](#) (July 2022), and the [Nurse Review of the Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape](#) (March 2023). Revisions and changes to the REF process also need to be located within an understanding of UKRI's strategic plan, [Transforming Together](#) (March 2022); plus a contextualised understanding of the contemporary pressures on universities. **Questions concerning REF2028 cannot be taken in isolation but must be embedded within a clear understanding of wider pressures, challenges and opportunities. An alignment of ambition and strategic policy is therefore critical within and beyond REF2028 planning.**
3. This submission seeks to highlight five issues:
 - i. The need to clarify the future link between REF2028 and QR funding.
 - ii. The existence of embedded structural inequalities.
 - iii. The benefits and risks of changes to research volume measurement.
 - iv. The value of early clarity around panel appointments and detailed guidance.
 - v. The opportunity to embed and support inter-disciplinarity.

The link between REF2028 and future QR funding.

4. The key issue for political studies (and the social sciences more broadly) relates less to the specific mechanics of a revised REF system and more to how the assessment process links to the distribution of QR funding. The Nurse Review raised concerns about the transparency, efficiency and viability of the current dual-support system. 'Government, working with UKRI and the UK higher education funding bodies' the report recommends 'should review, and when necessary reform, competitive and response-mode grant funding, QR (and Devolved Administration equivalents), and fEC, and replace them with improved mechanisms.' **The PSA believes that hypothecated research funding is essential to all disciplines and if a review is to be conducted then clarity of understanding between that process and preparation of REF2028 is paramount.**

The existence of embedded structural inequalities.

5. Political Studies is a broad and pluralistic discipline which seeks to promote equality, diversity and inclusion. The PSA is pleased, therefore, to see the adoption of a broader conception of research excellence, and a more inclusive approach to how the contribution to knowledge and understanding will be assessed. While these changes are likely to deliver major benefits (not least the facilitation of inter-sectoral mobility, increasing opportunities for 'braided' or 'blended' careers, and few incentives to 'buy-in' high profile researchers) there is however a need to acknowledge the existence of embedded structural inequalities within the higher education sector. The majority of research funding is dispersed to a minority of institutions, with [severe regional imbalances in distribution](#). As such, even with the new definition of 'research excellence' the 'new REF' is likely to disproportionately benefit the research-intensive universities. **Ahead of REF2028, The PSA is keen to see wider consultation on the issue of research (over)concentration when assessing the performance of different institutions and units and for further thought to be given as to how this might be addressed.**

The benefits and risks of changes to research volume measurement.

6. The shift from an emphasis on individuals towards a more open and inclusive unit submission is possibly the most significant element of the 'high level' decisions that have been taken, along with the increase in the weighting tied to the 'People, Culture and Environment' element. The ability to submit outputs from anyone with a 'substantive connection' to the research is welcome as the role of key 'research-enabling' staff has generally been overlooked in both debates and assessment processes. This, in turn, could have positive implications vis-à-vis equality, inclusion and diversity which could be transformational in scope and affect. **However, it does raise major questions about what could be termed 'institutional free-riding' where outputs are returned where the author or joint authors were not formally or specifically paid for their**

contribution or activity. Examples might include staff on teaching-only contracts who have no choice but to further their research profile in their own (unpaid) time; or in relation to PhD students who may be based in a department and to some extent therefore benefitting from the research environment and culture – but are not employees working for the department. There is also a risk that a move away from universal submission might lead to a return to hyper-selective selection processes that marginalize those deemed to be not doing ‘REF-able’ research. **The need for explanatory statements that contextualise the returned outputs within the overall size and composition of a unit may mitigate this risk but there is a need to [avoid naivete](#).**

The value of early clarity around panel appointments and detailed guidance.

7. The June 2023 publication of the high-level decisions and consultation questions underlined that REF2028 was not going to be a simple re-run of REF2021. A feature of previous REF processes has often been the rather late finalisation of ‘the rules of the game’. This creates institutional and individual anxiety which although hard to measure is detrimental to broader sectoral efficiency. PSA members emphasised that there is a need for Research England to acknowledge and understand what a significant shadow the REF process casts over the higher education sector. **The amount of internal bureaucracy, procedural oversight, unintended costs, and institutional anxiety generated by the need to be ‘REF ready’ is hard to fully comprehend by actors not based within a university setting.**
8. Therefore, although the publication of ‘high level’ decisions is welcomed the need to somehow accommodate meaningful and inclusive consultation processes while at the same time arriving at early and clear decisions as to process and content is paramount. **Notwithstanding the final report of the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel for the 2021 REF, and the June 2023 statement’s commitment to a ‘refreshed approach to panel appointments’ the need to get panel members recruited, trained and supported is also critical to the smooth roll out of REF2028.**

The opportunity to embed and support inter-disciplinarity.

9. Not only is political studies a broad and diverse discipline but its researchers very often work at the intersection of other cognate disciplines (economic, sociology, law, psychology, philosophy, etc.). **While not specifically being a topic where the consultation requested feedback it is possible to suggest that the June 2023 ‘initial decisions’ document did rather gloss over the challenges faced by inter-disciplinarity.** This links back into a previous point about the changing research development and innovation ecosystem, and the need to facilitate the mobility of people, knowledge and talent across traditional disciplinary, sectoral and organisational boundaries. Major scientific breakthroughs which have the potential to address major societal challenges are most likely

to be made at the intersection between disciplines and at the nexus between research and research-users. The June 2023 document states that REF2028 will ‘support the assessment of inter-disciplinary research’ but the suggestions for how this will be achieved remain modest. This seems odd given that the same document acknowledges that ‘measures introduced in REF2021 concerning inter-disciplinary research were [only] partially successful’. **This would seem a [major weak point](#) in the current planning process for REF2028 and we suggest the need for a bolder and more ambitious approach to supporting inter-disciplinary scholars.**

10. In conclusion, the PSA welcomes not only the principles embedded in the ‘high level’ decisions that have been taken for REF2028 but also the opportunity to engage in positive dialogue and consultation with research funders as the more specific elements of the assessment are finalised. It is important to acknowledge that the REF process has evolved to become something far more than a focused assessment process and has actually become a mechanism that governs the way academics, funders and universities interact with each other to shape the broader ecosystem. **REF2028 therefore represents a real opportunity to redefine excellence in research and to forge a thriving, flourishing and inclusive scientific community. The PSA looks forward to working closely with Research England to realise this potential.**

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