

Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework

Page 1: Respondent details

Q1. Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of

Representative body

Please provide the name of your organisation

Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA)

Page 2: Overall approach

Q2. 1. Do you have any comments on the proposal to maintain an overall continuity of approach with REF 2014, as outlined in paragraphs 10 and 23?

Since the emergence of the proposals for REF 2021, UCEA has been engaging on this topic with its 172 member Higher Education organisations to inform and seek feedback. A high level of concern has been voiced, particularly on the elements that relate to use of HESA data for staff selection, and UCEA has therefore consulted directly with its members on these issues. The issues have been discussed at the UCEA Board and at its Scottish Committee and this response now brings together the broad consensus views of UCEA's member HEIs on these issues.

The issues that UCEA has been discussing with its member HEIs relate to the use of HESA data for two aspects of the selection of staff, and because other organisations will be commenting more broadly, we limit this response to consultation questions 7 and 8.

Page 5: Staff

Q10. 7. Do you have any comments on the proposal to use HESA cost centres to map research-active staff to UOAs and are there any alternative approaches that should be considered?

UCEA strongly urges that the proposal to use HESA cost centres for the purpose of mapping individuals to UoAs is not taken forward.

The use of the Cost Centre code has been developed over several years by HEIs making their Staff Collection data submissions with a focus on its significance, for example, for application to course teaching allocations and SSRs, but never with an intention to capture the allocation of research activities and to necessarily comprehensively reflect often inter-disciplinary research collaborations of academic staff. For many staff the UoA alignments for research will differ very significantly from the Cost Centre to which their position is allocated in the HESA Staff Collection. To drive the UoA from data that does not align with the reality of individuals' actual research affiliations could both deliver erroneous results and have the unintended effect of unfairly assessing successful research clusters and inter-disciplinary activity.

The manual reconciliation and reallocation exercise that would be required would be such that a significant additional administrative burden would be introduced, without it being evident that the desired aims of this recommendation would be achieved. UCEA concludes that, until or unless there is the necessary development of a new marker within the HESA Staff Collection specifically to fulfil such a purpose, a manual process to allow institutions to select the units which best reflect the research activity being undertaken by individual staff members will remain the only feasible option for REF 2021, both to create least burden and to deliver the desired relevance, accuracy and efficiency of assessment. We would urge that there should be clear guidelines for how staff are allocated to UoAs, with the expectation that the strategies and approaches used by institutions are open and transparent.

Q11. 8. What comments do you have on the proposed definition of 'research-active' staff described in paragraph 43?

UCEA strongly urges that the use of HESA 'activity code' and 'academic employment function' for identifying 'research-active' individuals should not be taken forward.

While supporting the aim of an effective and low-burden mechanism, HEIs overwhelmingly view the current HESA staff record as not providing an effective mechanism for identifying 'research-active' staff. HESA guidance says that the choice of R, T or T/R should derive from the academic's contract of employment. This is not necessarily the same as the actual work undertaken; academics whose contracts make reference to research and/or scholarship would be deemed "research-active" regardless of whether they undertake any research activity. The binary choice does not reflect the breadth of current academic roles and many HEIs report they use T/R for want of anything more suitable.

A substantial number on academic contracts, particularly in modern universities with contractual terms derived from either HE 2000 (in Scotland) or the National Contract (elsewhere), in practice only have a minor responsibility for undertaking research and/or contractual references to scholarship which may include research. It is important to allow individuals flexibility to move between research and teaching intensive periods in their careers, enriching the academic environment, and to encourage knowledge exchange, entrepreneurial activities and professional practice. Rarely are these many aspects of an academic's endeavour distinguished through the contract and many HEIs feel it is inappropriate to manage the prioritisation of academic activities in this way. They are more likely to operate work allocation frameworks and advise that such transparent processes mean that academics are full participants in determining their research or other priorities. It would be highly undesirable were HE employers to feel compelled to change individual academics' contracts in order to fulfil a process for the administration of the next REF and equally undesirable were academics to feel inappropriately pressured to focus on REF-focussed types of research at the expense of important academic activities supporting the quality of teaching and the wider reach and impact of their institution.

Using the HESA Staff Collection is a laudable aim for reduction in burden; it may also increase transparency. However, it should only be done when data is meaningful for the purpose intended and thus be without damaging unintended consequences. In developing the HESA staff collection, it may be appropriate to modify the academic employment function marker to enable the return of information regarding significant research responsibility, rather than the contract. Alternatively it may be appropriate to develop a further data label. A consultation with HEIs could also explore the potential for a new marker to capture UoA.

UCEA proposes that a process be started to explore developing the HESA Staff Collection to assess its assistance in staff selection for a future REF. In the meantime, and realistically for REF 2021, we believe that HEIs will wish to work with the funding councils to develop a sufficiently transparent manual process for identification of those staff with significant responsibility for research and for their allocation to UoAs.

Page 13: Other

Q55. 44. Are there proposals not referred to above, or captured in your response so far, that you feel should be considered? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

UCEA has heard from many HEIs about the potentially damaging unintended consequences from the particular proposals to use HESA Staff Collection fields to identify 'research active' staff and UoAs. We believe that HEIs would be greatly assured if they knew as soon as possible that these current proposals for use of the Staff Collection were not to be taken forward.

Page 14: Contact details

Q56. If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

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