



## Consultation questions

(Boxes for responses can be expanded to the desired length.)

**Consultation question 1a:** Do you endorse our proposals for defining the broad group of science-based disciplines, and for dividing this into six main subject groups, in the context of our new approach to assessment and funding?

We do not think it appropriate to comment on the particular groupings. However, we do have more serious concerns about a strategy that relies on relatively few discipline groupings, in that it carries the unspoken assumption that judgements of quality are directly comparable across the various disciplines within the grouping. A repeated theme of soundings taken within social work is that important *differences between disciplines* will be hidden in such a system. A key issue will be the need to develop comparators that have the confidence of the disciplines and that reflect the important but often nuanced differences between one discipline and another. The planned pilot scheme may well mask any such differences and lead to an ungrounded assumption that they can safely be ignored or are of little importance.

Incidentally we find the excluding term 'non science-based disciplines' unacceptable in that it assumes a narrow and conventional model of science and also reinforces the view that certain disciplines are not 'scientific'

**Consultation question 1b:** Are there issues in relation to specific disciplines within this framework that we should consider?

**Consultation question 2a:** Do you agree that bibliometric indicators produced on the basis that we propose can provide a robust quality indicator in the context of our framework?

See below

**Consultation question 2b:** Are there particular issues of significance needing to be resolved that we have not highlighted?

See below

**Consultation question 3a:** What are the key issues that we should consider in developing light touch peer review for the non science-based disciplines?

We have gathered the main thrust of our response under this category, although we believe that several of the issues we raise also have relevance for the pilot of the science disciplines.

1 The majority of those within the social work discipline *welcome* the proposed move to a '*light touch*' continued system of peer review. However, we are aware that '*light touch*' is largely a synonym for 'low cost' and we do not believe that judgements of quality within social work research will carry the confidence of the field unless significant investment is made in reaching them.

2 Metric indices of research output quality must carry the confidence of the field. At present we do not believe this is the case. This is due to a number of factors:

a. The lack of *plausibility* of existing metrics eg journal rankings. [We appreciate that this is not quite the same as a citation index]. Along with the Web of Science, they do not carry the confidence of the field. One response from a leading university expressed this as follows: "Colleagues in several disciplines were pretty scathing about the extent to which Web of Science captures key outputs, let alone works citing these outputs". We are aware that the feasibility of book rankings via Google Scholar is been considered. We *welcome* this although many of the same limitations will apply to that scheme.

b. The serious evidence of *parochialism* in citation practice. The best proxy evidence of this can be found in the growing availability of data on journal downloads. Citations tend to be made from within the national subfield of the author/s. Hence, the major journals will [and do] always artificially privilege papers by authors from the USA. This may be most acutely felt for research by authors addressing issues that find their context in eg Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, where they will be less likely to be cited regardless of quality.

c. The near-certainty that citation practice will be vulnerable to games playing. We find the suggestion in some HEFCE quarters that such a system will be *less* vulnerable to games playing than the present system to be so implausible as to seem bizarre. The ease with which such practices could emerge makes it inevitable that they will do so. There is already evidence from the Netherlands that this has been a consequence of a move to quality metrics.

d. Citation practice, when used as a quality proxy, probably tends to reward research that falls within existing and familiar 'paradigms'.

In summary of this second point, colleagues in the social work discipline are not persuaded that citations are in fact a reliable proxy for quality – indeed, we are concerned that in much discussion the proxy character of citations is not even recognised.

3 Citations and quality in *applied disciplines*. Several concerns have been raised which focus on the need to develop quality indicators that reflect the character of research in applied disciplines. We believe that research quality must be assessed as much by 'outer-science' criteria as by 'inner-science' criteria (Shaw and Norton, 2007). We *welcome* the suggestion that the place of users will be taken into account. This must be reflected in the development of quality criteria in the expert groups. However, we are

concerned that the definition of 'user' will be drawn too narrowly, as it has been in the present RAE. It must include those who are direct 'users' of services provided by practitioners in applied fields as well as practitioners, funders and those in the policy domain. To quote one institution, "It remains imperative not to be driven by the outputs of research at the cost of being concerned with the outcomes of research. The problem with citation metrics is that they place a premium on impact within the academy when most social work researchers are (and arguably should be) at least as concerned with impact beyond the academy". However, we do *not* ask that such criteria should *replace* the 'inner-science' criteria of other disciplines but that they should *complement* them.

4 *Size of disciplines.* We *welcome* the recognition of the way that citation levels are a measure of the size of a discipline, and the undertaking that measures will be normalized to take this into account. However, we do not anticipate that this will be easy, and it appears to run counter to the pilot decision to group disciplines in ways that, as we have indicated, may mask important differences between disciplines. While we do not wish to impose our own version of parochialism, we reiterate that the criteria and standards must reflect the distinctive character of each discipline. For quantitative measures there must be a transparent form of calibration.

5 *Self citation.* We are on balance firmly opposed to including self citations. While we recognise that this would exclude a small number of genuinely innovative research outputs that have little recognition outside the immediate core of cross-citing researchers, the balance of costs and benefits is firmly weighted against such inclusion.

6 *Rewarding the status quo.* Our view is that whatever system is adopted, it should recognise and reward growing and developing research departments and groups, and not just reinforce the *status quo* by rewarding established institutions and departments. Taken together with the following point regarding recent work, we are concerned that the proposed system may have the unintended effect of making it still harder for those who have not had financial rewards through the RAE to break through. We strongly recommend that the development of any new system undertakes a review of the net consequences for financial settlements within the universities.

7 *Interpreting citations.* We have serious concerns regarding the interpretation of citation indexes. First, they will be very poor indicators of the *quality of recent work*. We note that there is a reference to drawing on a 5-10 year period to counter this. This introduces an important new problem that is absent from the RAE – that quality judgements will be based on relatively 'old' research, and the funding settlement for the REF will lack responsiveness to the quality of work currently being undertaken. This lack of responsiveness is a very serious problem of the proposed system that has received, to our knowledge, little or no recognition. Second, the significance of a clutch of citations will vary greatly from one source to another. In particular, citation indices do not recognise that a source may be cited either in acclaim or in criticism. But the one counts equally with the other under any system now known. Interpreting the *meaning* of a citation score will always be ambiguous.

#### Reference

Shaw, I and Norton M (2007) *Kinds and Quality of Social Work Research* London: Social Care Institute for Excellence

**Consultation question 3b:** What are the main options for the form and conduct of this review?

It is premature to foresee the optimum form for the REF in the humanities and social sciences.

**Consultation question 4:** Is there additional quantitative information that we should use in the assessment and funding framework to capture user value or the quality of applied research, or other key aspects of research excellence? Please be specific in terms of what the information is, what essential element of research it casts light on, how it may be found or collected, and where and how it might be used within the framework.

The expressed intention to use *research income* and some *student data* is welcomed by the social work discipline. However, the former and probably the latter will be open to games playing. Applied disciplines may have a higher proportion of part time students and the REF must not favour full time numbers. Also, in defining research income, we would urge that the present wide definition of research within the RAE is carried over to any new system, such that research income is not defined to exclude income sources that in traditional sciences may not be defined as 'research'.

**Consultation question 5:** Are our proposals for the role of expert panels workable within the framework? Are there other key issues on which we might take their advice?

See comments above regarding research 'users'

**Consultation question 6:** Are there significant implications for the burden on the sector of implementing our new framework that we have not identified? What more can we do to minimise the burden as we introduce the new arrangements?

**Consultation question 7:** Do you consider that the proposals in this document are likely to have any negative impact on equal opportunities? What issues will we need to pay particular attention to?

See comments above regarding applied disciplines and 'rewarding the *status quo*'. The character of the net funding settlement, the definition of 'research', the role of expert

panels, and the definitions of 'quality' will all potentially impact negatively on equal opportunity issues unless they are dealt with in a fully rounded way.

**Consultation question 8:** Do you have any other comments about our proposals, which are not covered by the above questions?