

## RESPONSE TO THE STERN REVIEW OF REF2020 (NOW 2021)

This response was agreed with TaPRA though each organization submitted it separately.

Q1

This response is from the Standing Conference for University Drama Departments (SCUDD), which represents departments of Drama and Performance in UK HE.

Certain key principles have informed research assessment and funding since the first RAE, and these should be retained: the Haldane principle, with research excellence and not political expediency as the driver for decision making; the commitment to all types of research, including applied, creative and curiosity-driven research, that recognizes value in all disciplines – STEAM as well as STEM; independent peer review; the recognition of both interdisciplinarity as well as difference in research.

Impact as defined in REF2014 was broad and inclusive, and we would advise strongly that this continues to be the case. Impact comes in many forms, and is rooted in excellent research. It is important that definitions of impact do not privilege economic or technological impacts (important though these are) over social, cultural, health and well-being: that these latter forms of impact are sometimes difficult to quantify should not disqualify them. They are also more likely to be the product of research in the Arts and Humanities.

Drama as a discipline is not opposed to the use of relevant data in research assessment, but is extremely sceptical about the use of established metrics. One of the main achievements in research in Drama and Performance over the last three assessment cycles (2001, 2008 and 2014) has been the articulation of research across many and varied forms of output: digital and broadcast media, performances, installations and exhibitions, and software design as well as text-based outputs. Thirty-three per cent of outputs submitted to sub-panel 35 (Drama and Music) of Main Panel D were in non-text based forms. None of this research would be captured by any metrics currently in use. Drama also accords higher status to forms of writing beyond the journal article (especially the monograph), and does not accept journal rankings: as the report from sub-panel 35 makes clear, research excellence should be rewarded wherever it can be found.

Any new system must respect distinct disciplinary practices, and acknowledge that the UK research culture as a whole benefits from this diversity. Non-metrical forms of data have an important, indeed crucial, place in Drama (and Arts) research. A recent article (Thelwell and Delgado's, 'Arts and Humanities Research Evaluation: No Metrics Please, Just Data' (*Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 71, pp. 817 – 833, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JD-02-2015-0028>) draws attention the different forms of data available and makes an explicit case for its deployment as evidence in Arts and Humanities research evaluations rather than established metrics.

Drama believes that peer-review should be the centre of any assessment process: metrics will never be an effective substitute, nor will they gain the trust of researchers in our discipline. If a simplification of peer-review is sought, then a reduction in outputs per researcher from 4 to 3 would be acceptable and would not compromise research excellence. It might also encourage longer term thinking of the kind valued by Lord Stern in some of his public pronouncements.

Q2

The focus on institutional level assessment in the consultation questions proceeds from changes to the remit of the REF, which, it would seem, have been agreed already. Section 2 of the Consultation document begins with the statement that 'The primary purpose of the REF is to inform the allocation of quality-related research funding'. This is a departure from the way that previous assessment exercises have been framed. Successive RAEs have been described as 'the principal means by which institutions assure themselves of the quality of the research undertaken in the HE sector' (<http://www.rae.ac.uk/aboutus/history.asp>) whilst the REF was announced as 'the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions' (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/>) the primary purpose of which was 'to assess the quality of research and produce outcomes for each submission made by institution'. Informing the allocation of QR funding is only one of four objectives outlined. How was the change in purpose of the REF arrived at? Who was responsible for it?

There is a danger that an emphasis on institutional information will obscure the vital significance of discipline-level research that emerges when research excellence is the main driver of the REF. The benefits of organising an exercise over as many Units of Assessment as in REF2014 are many, and it is difficult to see how the latter can be streamlined. This system recognises the rich diversity of UK research, seeking excellence in all disciplines, and ensures that no single discipline is prioritised over another when quality is considered. The Panel/Sub-Panel structure also provides a mechanism for informed peer review by other researchers with specialist knowledge and expertise. The involvement of research users, especially in the assessment of impact, ensures that industry professionals (and Arts practitioners) with knowledge and expertise in the sector are involved in the process.

Successive assessment exercises have placed the outputs of individual researchers at the centre of peer review, and this should continue: indeed, it is hard to see how research excellence can be gauged without actual research being considered. Researchers are also unidentified in the current system, and this should also continue: the REF should not be a performance management tool for universities (although increasingly it is), and there would be a great temptation to use the personalised data if the requirement for anonymity were removed.

Whilst reporting at institutional level makes sense for some purposes, as was the case in REF2014, it would not necessarily capture the different ways in which UoAs, and the disciplines they represent, access institutional resources or engage with strategic priorities or research mission statements. UK HEIs are as diverse and varied as the research they foster. Impact and environment should continue to reflect UoA research strategy, culture and resources. There is a good case to be made for refining the templates used so that more precise information is sought under common headings.

Q3

As we are not a HEI, SCUDD is not in a position to answer this question. There is no need for further data to be collected, if this is understood to refer to metrics.

Q4

HESA data is valuable, but not entirely comprehensive. The REF should be able to capture non-HESA data, especially concerning funding. Arts research, particularly in the field of creative practice, sometimes draws in funding from cultural bodies such as the Arts Councils of Wales and England or Creative Scotland, which often does not pass through normal university channels because, for example, it can only be paid to individuals. This funding, which may be for relatively small amounts, is often important to the impact that the research has beyond the academic community, and is not an alternative to Research Council support: there is an interconnection between the two, with one often providing a catalyst for securing the other. This is a further way in which the REF can recognise and support diversity within research.

The reporting of non-HESA information should not be burdensome, and will require some textual glossing: it cannot be collected or evaluated by data alone.

As Thelwell and Delgado have demonstrated (see qu1 above), research in the Arts, including practice-as-research, produces new forms of data using methodologies that are particular to the discipline. Any new system must be open to the ways in which disciplines generate data relevant to their research, often lying beyond the scope of established statistical indicators. As J. Wilsdon *et al* observe (in *The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management* (2015). DOI: 0.13140/RG.2.1.4929.1363), 'placing too much emphasis on narrow, poorly designed indicators such as journal impact factors (JIFs) can have negative consequences' (p. vii). This should give anyone considering such metrics pause for thought.

One distinctive feature of research in the Arts is that much of it sits at the meeting point of impact and public engagement, in a way that is not always the case with Humanities disciplines. REF2014 provided clear evidence of this (see UoA 35 sub-panel report – pp 92-110 – of Overview Report for Main Panel D). The imposition of metrics designed to suit one set of disciplines on all will undermine the diversity that is widely recognised as one of the UK HE sector's principal strengths.

## Q5

It is important that any attempt to influence behaviour with regard to the REF is not driven by short-term government priorities or by ideology: it is important to remember the Haldane principle in this context. The examples given in the consultation question, however, indicate areas over which there is much agreement in our discipline – interdisciplinarity and collaboration.

Collaboration, both between HEIs and between HE and other research-aware organisations, should be supported. It should not be seen, however, as a mechanism for reducing funding by requiring partners to pool a diminishing pool of resources, but a positive means of extending research horizons.

There is no single mechanism for ensuring collaboration, and it has to be acknowledged that the REF – whatever form it takes – encourages competition between institutions in ways that may run counter to the instincts of researchers themselves, who are, perhaps, more likely to embrace collaboration. It is important that any new system actively promotes collaboration and interdisciplinarity and ensures that both are written into the rules of the assessment process.

There would be value in extending ideas of collaboration to include supporting joint REF submissions. Such submissions might include partnerships with research-active organisations that are not HEIs as well as with HEIs that might otherwise not be submitted to the exercise but nevertheless contain pockets of research excellence.

SCUDD welcomes the introduction of impact as an element of assessment of research excellence, though does not believe it should attract a greater weighting than it already has: it should remain one element amongst several that should be considered in the evaluation of research excellence, and not be valued disproportionately. The assessment of the excellence of individual research outputs by expert peer review should remain at the centre of any exercise.

Q6

There is no doubt that the REF influences behaviour, especially at the institutional level: as a competitive exercise with both 'gold and glory' as the prize it cannot help but do so (and so will the TEF - it has already, even though it does not yet exist). It is also the case that the REF has, undeservedly, become a shorthand for the general bureaucratisation of HEI, and a metaphor for aggressive top-down management. This is problematic, and is likely to be exacerbated by an approach that focuses on institutional reporting. REF works best when the judgements made are rooted in a 'bottom-up' approach depending on expert peer evaluation by UK academics and industry sector professionals who are research users.

HEIs have not always proved supportive of research effort when it comes making judgements about REF, and many of the problems of the exercise have been caused by inappropriate management decisions and inadequate support for researchers. In the preparation period for REF2014, SCUDD and its fellow subject research association TaPRA performed a role that HEIs have sometimes abdicated, providing informed support, guidance and discipline-specific information about the REF, and bringing together researchers and current and past sub-panel members. At such meetings, colleagues across the sector spoke about forms of institutional bullying, about internal mock REFs where individuals passed judgement on outputs with little reference to the published criteria, and where non-print based outputs, long been accepted in the REF, were dismissed without reference to the published guidelines.

Government should do all it can to ensure that HEI management behaves responsibly: indeed, whatever mechanism is arrived at for managing the REF process should actively promote and model best practice in this area and provide guidance on the conflation of REF with issues of performance management.

The importance of the Environment and Impact narratives in restricting gaming should be recognised. Here the contribution of researchers to the research environment is detailed and evidenced (it is hard to contribute meaningfully to the development of a culture when you have been flown in at the last minute to boost the output profile.) Equally, the impact narrative allows for a discussion of how impact has been generated by the unit, which provides both a context and – sometimes – a corrective to the case studies, which might focus on the efforts of individual researchers. REF needs to ensure that the mechanisms for evaluating the wider culture of the unit are preserved rather than compromised by future plans.

The REF has an undoubted influence on the wider HE ecology, although it is difficult to disentangle it from other factors: UK and global rankings will depend on a lot more than REF scores, but an indication of its importance can be found on the home page of almost every research-active department, which often begins by trumpeting the percentage of 4\* research it achieved in 2014. It should be noted, however, that success in the international career market is not a proxy for research excellence.

## Q7

Despite initial reservations, REF is generally regarded positively by our discipline and has beneficial effects, most of which do not easily emerge if the focus is on institutions and not sectors. REF offers a way of examining the health of a discipline at a particular moment in time. It is about more than cataloguing past achievements – important though this is – and gives space to future developments. REF encourages self-reflection and a consideration of how a particular discipline or set of disciplines is evolving: what is being prioritized and why? Are particular areas under threat? How is the discipline responding to changes in the wider social or cultural landscape? It is an indispensable part of thinking about what we do and how we do it and often relates very directly to developments in the creative industries. REF also assists individual researchers to plan their research trajectories, and can assist in the process of prioritising and in thinking about accountability, responsibility and dissemination in relation to institutional and disciplinary priorities.

A system of peer review has been central to this process: careful peer review overseen by a robust process drawing on the expertise of experienced researchers and industry representatives who have an awareness of engaging with and drawing on research in their own work. Impact has been a key mode for indicating how research in the UK makes a difference beyond the HE sector.

REF needs to acknowledge changes to the research field, and in particular emerging disciplines and sub-disciplines (eg computer games and cultural enterprise) and ensure that they are represented appropriately.

There are issues concerning diversity and inclusion that warrant attention. Early Career Researchers are conspicuously absent from the Review document. What are the implications for ECRs of the metrics approach favoured in this consultation document? It is possible that any move towards metrics will disadvantage them. REF2014 made noticeable improvements over previous RAEs with regard to issues of equality and diversity with clear guidelines in place to assist with maternity and paternity leave, and complex circumstances. The UoA 35 subpanel report indicated that REF unit narratives did not always engage with equality and diversity concerns either at institutional or unit level. It would be productive if the Steering Committee could consider how to ensure that these issues are not marginalized.

On the tail of the REF, the sector is now faced with the TEF: we would welcome a coordinated approach across government concerning on the burden involved in the preparation of REF and TEF submissions. This should not impede productivity or compromise quality in either assessment exercise. Once again, the input of expert peer reviewers will be key to the success of the process.

Although the majority of Drama and Performance research was submitted to UoA 35, some went to other subpanels (notably UoA 36). A common complaint has been that subpanel reports varied considerably in length and depth. The Review Steering Committee might want to read them to identify good practice in this area.

## Q8

We would not oppose moves to consider future plans as well as past success, and note that the current dual support system achieves this by supporting both prospective plans (through the Research Councils) and retrospective achievements (through REF). This system should not be discarded lightly.

It is possible that a reformulation of the Environment narrative template to present specific questions (answered in 200 or 300 word blocks completed at department level) would enable better assessment of the relationship of priorities to investment. This would only be the case, however, if they were formulated in a way that did not favour a particular kind of institution.

Some of SCUUD's member departments exist in smaller, specialist and/or geographically located institutions and we are very concerned that any new model for the REF recognises the rich diversity of HEIs. The mission statements and priorities of specialist institutions may well be different from those of large, multi-faculty universities, and the Review Committee should recognise and celebrate this diversity. Excellent research should be rewarded wherever it is found.

It is particularly disappointing, in this regard, that the composition of the Review Steering Committee does not reflect the diversity of the sector and reflects a strong inflection towards Russell Group institutions. Furthermore, there is no representative from the Creative Arts sector – nor, indeed, of the UK Humanities - so the Committee claim to represent adequately 'a range of subjects' does not stand scrutiny. As we are sure Lord Stern knows, the Creative Arts make a significant contribution to the economic, cultural and spiritual life of the UK. The Creative Industries contribute over £77 billion a year to the UK's economy and £15.5 billion of exports (Creative Industries Federation, 'The C Report 2015-2016, pp. 32, 22). Estimates show that the UK's publicly-invested Arts return 0.4% of the UK's GVA and continue to contribute indirectly to GVA through a number of means (eg tourism, overseas trade and regional growth) ('The C Report 2015-2016, p. 35). Disciplines such as Drama, Music, Fine Art, Graphic Design, Photography and Film have a long history of engagement with the Creative Industry sector in the UK; research is often the mode through which these processes of engagement and innovation operate. Evidence for this will be found in the impact case studies, now in the public domain. It is particularly disappointing that a review that announces its intention to refine the REF to incentivise constructive and creative behaviours has not chosen to draw on direct representation from this sector. This is a wasted opportunity. The fact that the Review Committee has chosen to privilege STEM disciplines in its composition sends a poor signal to the Arts and Humanities research communities.

Q9

The Review document uses the word 'national' to refer to the UK as a whole, and there is no recognition that responsibility for Higher Education is devolved. Is it assumed that the devolved nations will simply fall into line behind whatever is decided by the UK government? This could prove a dangerous assumption. The existence of devolved responsibility, and the need to negotiate with the devolved nations of the UK should be acknowledged.

It is worth noting that the administrative costs of REF are relatively low: just 2.4% of the annual funding distributed. This compares favourably with the administrative burden of preparing the 80% of grant applications that do not get funded by the Research Councils. It is important to ensure that certain types of labour are not identified as burdensome (REF) and others just seen as the necessary part of a process (Research Council applications).

It is our firm view that in future REFs journal rankings should *never* be considered when assessing articles nor should any form of output be privileged or otherwise in comparison with any other.

We would argue that the composition of panels and subpanels should be revisited. Subpanels that bring cognate subjects together (eg Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts in 35) encouraged and supported interdisciplinary assessment, particularly when accompanied by an effective cross-referral system. SCUDD supports interdisciplinary research, but observes that the term needs to be used with

caution, and with due regard its usage by the European Research Council to refer to 'frontier research'. It has been noted by SCUDD members that some disciplines – perhaps the more established ones with the ear of government and with robust representation in the British Academy - were privileged in REF2014. Disciplines such as Drama, Dance and Music, and Art and Design were fused in new, large, multi-discipline panels while others, numerically much smaller, were in much smaller single discipline units. A greater degree of consistency and transparency here would be welcomed.

We would urge the Review to consider the position of certain disciplines, whose position remains anomalous. Film and Television Studies, which may be located in a number of departments (including Departments of Drama and Performance), was split across several subpanels in Main Panel D. This merits closer consideration for REF 2021.

There are three additional reasons why metrics are a poor substitute for expert peer review. Firstly, there are costs involved in investing in the required analytical software/services (eg from Thompson Reuters or Elsevier), which might prove profitable for the companies involved but would divert funds away from HEIs. Secondly, emerging research excellence is often not identified by metrics (see Wilsdon, J., *et al* 2015). Thirdly, there are implications for equality and diversity in the deployment of metrics (eg with regard to gender) that would run counter to the welcome focus on access and diversity in the Green Paper.