

ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

August 2011

Presidential Letter

Dear Fellows and Members

2014 RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

I am writing in connection with the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (2014REF) Exercise, and particularly concerning the consultation process on panel criteria and working methods that was announced about 10 days ago.

If you go onto the REF website you will see (under 'Publications') the flurry of recent documents that has recently emerged from Hefce, following on from the document REF 01.2011 Decisions on assessing research impact that was issued March 2011.

In particular I draw your attention to: Document REF 02.2011 Assessment framework and guidance on submissions, the Guidance to panels and Document REF 03.2011 Consultation on draft panel criteria and working methods, all three of which were published in July. The latter document announces the consultation with the academic community, with a deadline of 5 October.

The published documents stand in a complex relationship to one another. New readers might wish to approach them as follows. Start with the Consultation on draft panel criteria and working methods. This comprises a generic statement and draft statements for the four main panels. History falls within the remit of Panel D. Annex A to the generic statement specifies 8 consultation questions. Consider these in relation to the generic statement and the draft statement for Panel D (and draft statements by other panels, if you want to compare approaches across the different panels, perhaps especially as between History and social science disciplines, which come under Panel C).

There is considerable overlap between the main content of the generic statement and the 'Assessment framework and guidance on submissions'. Basically the generic statement is shorter and focusses on describing what is intended, whereas the 'Assessment framework' provides more in the way of rationale. When you have formulated some views on the basis of the generic statement, you will probably find it useful to check these against the fuller account provided in the 'Assessment framework'.

The 'Guidance to panels' sets out the issues panels should be addressing in their draft statements. You may want to check the Panel D draft statement against these guidelines.

The Society's Research Policy Committee and Council has already begun to consider our response to REF. On 16 September, RHS Council will be holding a special meeting with the 2014 REF History Sub-Panel Chair, Professor Chris Wickham. We are inviting representatives to attend from the British Academy, History UK, the Historical Association and the Institute of Historical Research. This will give us an opportunity to make representations about the REF documents and also will influence the reply we make to the consultation document.

I am very keen to hear the views of individual Fellows and Members on REF issues over the next few weeks. Those views can then be filtered into RHS Council discussions with Chris Wickham on 16 September, and can subsequently also influence the Society's response to the REF consultation document by 5 October. It would be most helpful if you would send your comments to c.d.h.jones@qmul.ac.uk by FRIDAY 9 SEPTEMBER.

It will be important that we use this occasion as productively as we can. The consultation document is about panel criteria and working methods, not core principles. For current

purposes we need to take as read even controversial core issues such as the inclusion of 'impact' and the weighting of the different elements, and focus on ways in which these principles are being implemented, and how they can best be implemented in order to nurture research and scholarship.

The Consultation on draft panel criteria and working methods document provides a template for responses: see 'Annex A: Consultation questions and response information' (Document REF 03.2011, cited above, p. 20ff). You'll see it is quite wide-ranging. It would be most helpful if you could make any comments to me within this framework – though feel free to supply more general opinions too.

I have still a lot of checking of the fine detail in these documents ahead of me, but my current sense is that the REF is shaping up in ways that could well have been worse. The overall feel is that REF will resemble RAE (at least a devil we all know). There is a similar emphasis, for example, on the 4 Outputs as the largest element within the assessment (now at 65%, as opposed to 20% for Impact and 15% for Research Environment); outputs are judged on merit not location of publication; department size is regarded as irrelevant; early career researchers and staff with exceptional circumstances are protected; and bibliometrics are excluded for our discipline, with research income and PGRs remaining the sole usable metrics. We are also fortunate in that History is a single-subject sub-panel. Some

innovations, moreover, seem meritorious - a less haphazard method of integrating the work of additional assessors alongside panelists, for example; a greater emphasis on equality and diversity; and the double weighting for books (introduced formally and across the board for the first time). However, the devil is, as usual, in the detail, and it is at the level of detail that we will need to focus.

I realise that it is becoming wearisomely the rule that consultations like these take place in the summer when colleagues are trying to get some research done (let alone have a holiday). However, the stakes are high and your continued vigilance and active participation are now sought. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Colin

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