

## Annex A

### Consultation questions and response form

1. Responses to the consultation should be made by completing the form below, and returning it by e-mail by **midday on Wednesday 16 December 2009**.
2. All responses should be e-mailed to [ref@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:ref@hefce.ac.uk). **In addition:**
  - a. Responses from institutions in Scotland should be **copied to** Pauline Jones, Scottish Funding Council, e-mail [pjones@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:pjones@sfc.ac.uk).
  - b. Responses from institutions in Wales should be **copied to** Linda Tiller, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, e-mail [linda.tiller@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:linda.tiller@hefcw.ac.uk).
  - c. Responses from institutions in Northern Ireland should be **copied to** the Department for Employment and Learning, e-mail [research.branch@delni.gov.uk](mailto:research.branch@delni.gov.uk).
3. We will publish an analysis of responses to the consultation. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act. The Act gives a public right of access to any information held by a public authority, in this case HEFCE. This includes information provided in response to a consultation. We have a responsibility to decide whether any responses, including information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential. We can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. This means responses to this consultation are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Further information about the Act is available at [www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk). Equivalent legislation exists in Scotland.

#### Respondent's details

<b>Are you responding:</b> (Delete one)	On behalf of an organisation
<b>Name of responding organisation/individual</b>	The Royal Astronomical Society
<b>Type of organisation</b> (Delete those that are not applicable)	Learned society
<b>Contact name</b>	Dr Robert Massey
<b>Position within organisation</b>	Press and Policy Officer
<b>Contact phone number</b>	020 7734 3307
<b>Contact e-mail address</b>	<a href="mailto:rm@ras.org.uk">rm@ras.org.uk</a>

#### Consultation questions

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

**Consultation question 1:** Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF? If not, explain why.

The RAS welcomes the decision to reduce the weight of bibliometric indicators and the acknowledgement that peer review should be the primary means of assessment. The Society accepts that the outputs from research in physical sciences (including astronomy) can use metrics such as citation and publication rates as a partial indicator of performance but believes that these are more useful in establishing the volume rather than the quality of that research.

We further welcome the proposals that set out how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can take account of researchers whose careers are interrupted for different reasons and those holding independent fellowships.

We are however concerned at the proposed introduction of the 'impact' sub-profile and discuss this further in our responses to questions 3 and 5.

**Consultation question 2:** What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing outputs? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

Comments are especially welcomed on the following proposals:

- that institutions should select research staff and outputs to be assessed
- for the categories of staff eligible for selection, and how they are defined
- for encouraging institutions to submit – and for assessing – all types of high-quality research outputs including applied and translational research
- for the use of citation information to inform the review of outputs in appropriate UOAs (including the range of appropriate UOAs, the type of citation information that should be provided to panels as outlined in Annex C, and the flexibility panels should have in using the information)

and on the following options:

- whether there should be a maximum of three or four outputs submitted per researcher
- whether certain types of output should be 'double weighted' and if so, how these could be defined.

**Consultation question 3:** What comments do you have on the proposed approach to assessing impact? If you disagree with any of these proposals please explain why.

Comments are especially welcomed on the following:

- how we propose to address the key challenges of time lags and attribution
- the type of evidence to be submitted, in the form of case studies and an impact statement supported by indicators (including comments on the initial template for case studies and menu of indicators at Annex D)

- the criteria for assessing impact and the definition of levels for the impact sub-profile
- the role of research users in assessing impact.

This proposal is of great concern to the Society and we do not agree that it should be introduced.

The Society concurs with the underpinning premise that researchers should facilitate the exploitation of their work by society and industry. In astronomy there are many examples of this taking place, such as imaging techniques being used in medicine and signal processing being applied to communications. We also agree that impact is much more than just the direct economic effect of research and encompasses wider societal benefits (such as increasing interest in careers in science and engineering) as well as making an important contribution to culture. Astronomy has a strong record in all these areas.

However, researchers in astronomy are rarely able to predict the impact of their research at the outset or during the first few years. Very often impacts that do result are a consequence of many years (or even several decades) of further work and are extremely difficult to attribute to the original research. For example the development of wi-fi from radio astronomy took more than three decades and relied on contributions from other disciplines.

To try to address the issue of time lags, the REF proposes to consider impacts that have become evident during the assessment period, with a time limit of 10-15 years from original research to application. For much curiosity-driven research, this will likely to be insufficient to capture its impact, which illustrates how problematic this assessment will prove to be.

Further, there are serious problems in attributing an impact to a specific piece of research. Astronomy is not generally an area where the research is 'close to market' and yet researchers in other areas often draw on its findings. The REF peer review panels may well struggle to disaggregate the role of different research groups and companies in bringing an idea from its initial inception in an HEI to its final implementation. This difficulty is acknowledged in the consultation document and it is suggested that 'an approach' will be developed to tackle it. The RAS is not convinced that this is feasible, nor that in practice this approach will give due credit to the different contributors.

For softer 'cultural' impacts the process is even more difficult. For example, it is simply not possible to attribute the enormous popularity of astronomy with the wider public to a single research group or to easily assess the contribution that each group makes in this area.

Finally, if the Unit of Assessment (UoA) is expected to demonstrate the impact of existing work (as set out in the draft impact assessment form in Annex D), we believe that this will greatly disadvantage 'early career' researchers as the assessment will come too soon for their research to have had a significant impact outside of their field of study.

**Consultation question 4:** Do you have any comments on the proposed approach to assessing research environment?

**Consultation question 5:** Do you agree with our proposals for combining and weighting the output, impact and environment sub-profiles? If not please propose an alternative and explain why this is preferable.

We do not agree that the impact element should be introduced to the REF.

However, if impact *is* to be considered then we believe that it should make up no more than 5% of the assessment framework. This would allow groups that wished to cite their successful work in this area to do so but ensure that the quality of research remains central to and of overwhelming importance to the assessment process.

**Consultation question 6:** What comments do you have on the panel configuration proposed at Annex E? Where suggesting alternative options for specific UOAs, please provide the reasons for this.

**Consultation question 7:** Do you agree with the proposed approach to ensuring consistency between panels?

**Consultation question 8:** Do you have any suggested additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies? (If suggesting additional bodies, please provide their names and addresses and indicate how they are qualified to make nominations.)

**Consultation question 9:** Do you agree that our proposed approach will ensure that interdisciplinary research is assessed on an equal footing with other types of research? Are there further measures we should consider to ensure that this is the case and that our approach is well understood?

**Consultation question 10:** Do you agree that our proposals for encouraging and supporting researcher mobility will have a positive effect; and are there other measures that should be taken within the REF to this end?

**Consultation question 11:** Are there any further ways in which we could improve the measures to promote equalities and diversity?

**Consultation question 12:** Do you have any comments about the proposed timetable?

**Consultation question 13:** Are there any further areas in which we could reduce burden, without compromising the robustness of the process?

**Consultation question 14:** Do you have any other comments on the proposals?