

Response to Department for Business, Innovation & Skills consultation on higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice

Introduction

The Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS) brings together 40 learned societies and subject associations with 1,100 distinguished practitioners, academics and government social scientists; they come from across our disciplines, from business and behavioural studies to geography and anthropology. Its Campaign for Social Science, supported by universities, companies and charities, launched *The Business of People* a year ago, with the participation of science minister Greg Clark (<https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/businessofpeople/>). Drawing on the experience of its members, the AcSS here addresses the need for more strategic thinking and capacity in publicly supported science and knowledge creation. The AcSS endorses the twin aims of a better central 'strategy' for knowledge and the preservation of space for free pursuit of knowledge (which must be both adequately funded and supported in research governance).

Answers to questions in the green paper

Question 12a

We **support** proposals for improved participation from students from disadvantaged and BME backgrounds but **note** the social science evidence points to the importance of home background (and policies affecting household income and employment) in determining access to future jobs and income.

Question 12c

We **note** that parental income, social networks and 'background' remain vastly more important as predictors of high income and employment status (see for example Elias, P and Purcell, K 2015 Higher Education: labour markets, employability and social mobility: examining the research evidence. Paper at Society for Research into Higher Education consultation, December 17).

Question 13

We **support** proposals to make public data on applications, admissions and outcomes. This would improve decision-making and feed longitudinal policy analysis by, for example, the ESRC's Administrative Data Research Network (<http://adrn.ac.uk/>).

Question 18a

We **support** student-centred higher education, but matched by commitments to academic freedom and greater transparency in the information available to students and taxpayers. We **recommend** the government take this opportunity to restate the larger contribution higher education makes to individuals, society and the economy. Higher education also embraces postgraduate training (which is vital for the future health of research), knowledge exchange with firms and work on innovation and impact.

Question 24

We **support** the main thrust of the Nurse recommendations, including the establishment of RUK. We underline the report's regret at eliminating smaller research grants. Their disappearance has been a special loss in the social sciences, removing a source of low-cost additions to knowledge and opportunities for early career researchers. We **support** the proposed transfer of Shared Business Services. Its relocation would give Research UK (RUK) a tool for speeding up and simplifying funding practices. We **strongly support** Nurse's emphasis on discovery or blue skies science and can supply good examples of social science work published decades ago that has policy and intellectual resonance today.

To be effective, the *Ministerial Committee* will need input from government social science. We **recommend** (re)creating a government chief social scientist. Take planning for an ageing population: social scientists work across pensions policy, design, housing, social care, older age employment and so on: a government chief social scientist would look over a more transparent division of labour between (mainly applied) research commissioned by government departments and agencies and the discovery and translational role of research councils.

The Ministerial Committee should seek the expert judgement of *RUK* on research capacity and the direction of science policy: their relationship should be a dialogue, recognising both the autonomy and intellectual challenge that secures excellent research and accountable oversight of strategy and policy challenges. RUK has a subtle task. It must pull down walls between domains of knowledge while respecting the autonomy of the research councils and their domain strategies and distinctive funding streams. The advance of knowledge is often cross-disciplinary yet strong disciplines are the basis for the excellent multidisciplinary work (Walport, M 2015 All the talents: policy needs social science and humanities' input, THE October 22 p28-29). We hope RUK can build on existing and past collaboration, recognising the value of the individual research councils and their dialogue with researchers and departments.

Constructing RUK while evolving the *research councils* presents an administrative challenge, to which social science expertise in organisations, leadership and innovation has much to contribute (the ESRC's Jane Elliott has already played a leading role). We **recommend** this work, and the internal architecture, be the subject of further consultation, to which we want to contribute. Among qualities RUK's board will need are understanding of policy, politics and the economics and sociology of knowledge – perquisites of trained social scientists. A social scientist could bring deep insight to the role of chief executive of RUK. We **recommend** the ESRC, with the other research councils, retain its integrity, its capacity to maintain infrastructure (for example Understanding Society) and autonomous governance.

Question 25a

We **recommend** RUK responsibility for dual support be separated from its research council functions and written into a robust legal framework. For their credibility and effectiveness, arrangements and finance for REF and QR should be managed at arm's length from Government departments. The detail must be the subject of further consultation.

Question 26

Social scientists have made good use of knowledge exchange programmes to maximize the impact of their work and **recommend** they continue.

Question 27

Amid changes to research governance and university teaching, we **recommend** an incremental approach to reforming the REF. While this is now the subject of the Stern review, the assessment framework for REF 2021 needs to be established as soon as possible, to give universities and researchers adequate time to prepare. While some concern over the costs and administrative burden of the REF is understandable, we think it is important that Stern accounts fully for the costs and benefits of both strands of the dual support funding system. As reinforced by the recent Technopolis review of REF 2014 costs, administration of the exercise counts for less than 2 per cent of the funding that is then allocated http://www.technopolis-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/REF_costs_review_July_2015.pdf. By comparison, applications to research councils (especially with success rates now at an historic low) are far more expensive as a proportion of funding allocated.

A metric-based REF in 2021 is problematic for several reasons:

First, coverage across disciplines. A significant proportion of research outputs assessed in REF 2014 would be missed – at least a fifth of those submitted by such leading social science universities as the LSE, Oxford and Cambridge. In addition to journal articles, excellent social science is also delivered in the form of books, applied projects and data sets, all of which deserve considered assessment, but don't feature in existing bibliometrics databases.

Second, as shown by two major reports in the past year available metrics are not yet robust or sophisticated enough to measure impacts with anything like the richness or robustness of the REF 2014 case studies (Wilsdon, J et al 2015, The Metric Tide: report of the independent review of the role of metrics in research assessment and management and Digital Science/Kings Policy Institute 2015 The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/publications/Analysis-of-REF-impact.pdf>).

Third, as highlighted in The Metric Tide, there are concerns over the equality and diversity implications of any move to a metric-based system, given extensive empirical evidence of certain biases (for example, by gender) in citation practices.

Fourth, we are not convinced that moving to a metric-based REF would in fact reduce administrative costs by any significant amount, with because HEIs would then be incentivised to purchase additional analytical services from the two main providers in this arena (Elsevier and Thomson Reuters) and other metric services, and because, even with a more automated REF, HEIs will still invest heavily in managing and optimising their performance in other exercises, for example the international university league tables.

For all of these reasons, we favour an incremental, rather than radical overhaul of the REF for 2021. And rather than moving hastily to a metrics-based system, we believe the emphasis for the next five years should be placed on improving the robustness, coverage

and interoperability of existing research datasets, so that quantitative indicators can progressively play a larger role in the management of the research system, in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Comment

Proposals for English higher education will be scrutinised by the Westminster parliament and, for research, also by the devolved institutions; we look forward to contributing. Similarly as government plans for research governance unfold. Representative bodies and the public have a role in research strategy. Research councils, including the ESRC and BBSRC, have invested in public engagement and RUK should build on their work, as it evolves means both to talk and listen to the public.

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References

1. <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/businessofpeople/>
2. http://www.technopolis-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/REF_costs_review_July_2015.pdf
3. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/publications/Analysis-of-REF-impact.pdf>