

REF CONSULTATION: RESPONSE FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF BUSINESS SCHOOLS

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. **In addition:**
 - a. Responses from institutions in Scotland should be **copied to** Pauline Jones, Scottish Funding Council, e-mail 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.
 - c. Responses from institutions in Northern Ireland should be **copied to** the Department for Employment and Learning, e-mail 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. Equivalent legislation exists in Scotland.

Respondent's details

Responding	On behalf of an organisation
Organisation	The Association of Business Schools (ABS, www.the-abs.org.uk)
Type of organisation	Association. ABS is the representative body and authoritative voice for all leading business schools of UK universities, higher education institutions and independent management colleges. ABS has 117 institutional members and promotes the study of business and management to help improve the quality and effectiveness of managers in the UK and internationally. This response is based on consultation with ABS members and a joint workshop on impact with AIM Research for 30 senior business and management scholars, as well as representatives from policy and practice.
Contact	Julie Davies
Position	Head of Research and Executive Development
Telephone	0788 400 2470
Email	jdavies@the-abs.org.uk

Consultation questions

1. Do you agree with the proposed key features of the REF?

Generally the Association is supportive of the approach taken in REF to assess the quality and impact of research. Like the British Academy of Management, we are pleased to note that peer review has been retained as a key component of the assessment of output quality. Peer review is vital as citation measures on their own are not sufficient because coverage in the business and management field is inadequate. Google Scholar, Publish or Perish, is a key source for citations because coverage is much wider than ISI. *The ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide* is updated annually using available citation data; the March 2010 version will incorporate a separate list of impact journals.

The desire to assess impact is to be applauded, however, we are concerned that the approach to impact (as it develops) will be geared largely towards STEM subjects. The business and management UoA is one of the largest in the REF. ABS advocates caution in implementing an unproven model to assess the impact of research excellence in a business school context which is multi-,inter-and cross-disciplinary in nature. Impact needs to be more clearly defined and the methodology to measure impact needs to be tested in a business school context.

The consultation document portrays a view of impact where 'units' develop research that is then transferred to 'users', i.e. a very traditional view of knowledge transfer. Business schools are involved in the co-creation of knowledge with organisations and individuals. Moreover, this knowledge often exists as procedures and behaviours, and cannot be as easily evidenced as, for example, physical devices, or by counting intellectual property rights. We would welcome greater clarity on the nature and assessment of case studies. The Association would like to propose a pilot study to measure impact in several business schools.

ABS is unconvinced about changing the definition of 4*.

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.

The REF should seek to provide efficient and effective measurements of impact. Business school research does impact a broad range of stakeholders. Like the Advanced Institute of Management Research, ABS is concerned about the proposed case studies and would appreciate clear quality guidelines and assurance that panel members understand fully how to assess impact as well as scholarship. ABS would seek to limit the degree of 'creative writing' in REF submissions. As the evaluation of impact is a new development, its measurement must be properly defined. Impact of excellent research on teaching in universities should be included. In common with the British Academy

of Management, ABS recommends delaying the implementation of REF by 12 months to ensure a workable definition of impact and to test the practicalities of measuring impact effectively and efficiently. ABS is willing to co-ordinate pilot measures of impact in a diverse group of business schools.

ABS supports the general approach that is to be retained from the RAE, i.e., institutions select staff to be submitted who are then categorised, with outputs linked to individuals. We agree with the view expressed in the consultation document that the proportion of staff selected should not be a significant factor in assessing quality in the REF. We would support a move to **three** outputs per researcher, since it would appear that the fourth output did not greatly change the rankings of assessments in the Business and Management panel. Moreover, it might allow REF to capture more researchers than did the RAE. However, we would encourage clarity in the number of outputs submitted per individual, i.e. if it is to be a maximum of three outputs then this should be stated explicitly.

We have concerns about a reliance on citation data, as identified in our response to question 1, and would wish to see the Business and Management panel largely driven by peer review in tandem with citations. With regard to double weighting of certain outputs, generally we support this. We think that this will encourage the submission of monographs and substantive research reports, representing more integrative outputs which provide an in-depth examination of a particular issue and may make a more substantive contribution to knowledge.

We are concerned about the changed definitions of 4* within REF and the argument for this change is not convincing. The gradings in RAE 2008 are well known and appeared uncontroversial. Comparison will no doubt be made between the REF and RAE 2008; if profiles are to be scaled downward this will suggest to the media that the quality of research is diminishing. In short, it is the view of ABS that the merits deriving from the proposed change in the grading of outputs are outweighed by the drawbacks.

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.

The Association ran a joint consultation workshop with AIM Research on the assessment of impact; participants comprised over 30 senior academics in business and management schools, as well as representatives from Government (including HEFCE and research councils) and the private sector. A key concern was the proposed case studies.

ABS applauds the desire to measure impact and the reduction in importance of notions of esteem. The current proposals, however, appear to be driven by STEM and traditional notions of knowledge transfer. This feedback relates to both the concept of impact as well as its measurement. Simple measurement instruments may not be able to capture the sheer variety of impacts deriving from business and management research. Research income generated from business does not strike us as an obvious impact measure. We would wish the Business and Management panel to be able to consider cases of co-creation of knowledge that has had a positive impact on policy, strategy or organisation within varied organisational forms —including the public, voluntary and corporate sectors. A key implication of collaborative research is that impact often occurs **while** the research is being done and the academic outputs usually appear **after** the research has been completed.

Further, we are concerned that the draft menu of impact indicators suggests too many quantitative measures. For example, reference to changes in stakeholders' strategy and activities, policy forums for civil servants deriving from research and user generated-reports incorporating academic research, may be useful indicators of 'impact' in such narratives but are not quantifiable. We would prefer to see more explicit examples of non-measurable cases of impact, to allow both submitting institutions and panels themselves to understand these broader concepts and measures of impact.

4. Do you have any comments on the proposed approach to assessing research environment?

This seems to be largely in line with RAE 2008 and thus well-known, transparent and acceptable. PGR data must include all doctoral level researchers, including DBA students that produce a research thesis which is independently examined as part of their education. ABS would like to see editorship of journals and engagement with important conferences as fully measured within the research environment, and note that it is mentioned under 'engagement', but wish to see it as a higher priority. External accreditation of research programmes, such as ESRC recognition, should be regarded by the REF as providing a clear indication of excellence and be taken into account in the grading of research environment.

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.

ABS recommends a weighting of **15%** each for impact and environment and **70%** for output would be appropriate given that that measurement of impact is being implemented for the first time.

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.

The membership of the Business and Management panel needs to represent all areas covered by UK business schools. To ensure adequate representation, the panel should include experts who can assess research in:

- (i) Accounting and finance.
- (ii) Management information systems within business schools, following restructuring of the Library and Information Management panel.
- (iii) Economics research produced in business schools.
- (iv) Sports research related to business and management.

Given the small numbers submitted to Accounting and Finance in RAE 2008, many business school deans see little issue with wrapping this into Business and Management. Feedback from a member of the RAE 2008 Accounting and Finance panel indicated there were many cross referrals from the Business and Management panel. A small subset of Business and Management panel members may find it difficult to evaluate the total volume and diversity of Accounting and Finance submissions, especially given the wide diversity of research methodologies adopted in the two sub-disciplines. While co-opting external informal advisers is allowed for in the REF proposals, the incentives for such advisers are not identical to those of full panel members, in which case the reliability of Accounting and Finance evaluations may fall.

7. Do you agree with the proposed approach to ensuring consistency between panels?

ABS considers consistency to have been poor in RAE 2001 and RAE 2008, so any attempts to improve consistency are welcomed. We think a key touch point for this must be the identification and measurement of 4* publications, where, for example, there was poor consistency between the Economics and Business and Management panels in 2008. We think publications in world-leading journals should be evaluated as such and

by experts in the relevant domain, and not downgraded by panel members that have personal preferences for other types of research.

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.)

The list is broad and covers all the chartered institutes and professional bodies with which business schools typically engage. Please note, the Institute of Small Business Affairs is now the Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE).

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?

There is evidence that the closer research is to traditional mainstream social sciences (economics, psychology, etc.), the more likely panels are to rate it higher. Important inter- and multi- disciplinary research areas such as entrepreneurship, small business management, health care management and information systems management can struggle to produce publications that gain acceptance in conventional, reference disciplinary outlets.

A serious issue for business schools is that work within the unit can itself be inter-, multi- or cross-disciplinary, yet the resulting publications are submitted against individual researchers. By comparison, cross-unit or cross-university publications can be submitted against multiple researchers without dilution of the submissions.

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?

We see little that will discourage the hiring of 'star' researchers at appropriate moments relative to the census date. Business schools that include pockets of excellence in specific areas have typically tended to lose key staff to larger full service business schools (and higher salaries) in the run up to each assessment exercise. We do not suggest a solution but do note the problem.

11. Are there any further ways in which we could improve the measures to promote equalities and diversity?

The measures to promote equality and diversity appear appropriate. It is important that university equality codes ensure different demographic groups have access to opportunities to develop their research careers. Measures should encourage and reward the inclusion of early career researchers in the REF.

12. Do you have any comments about the proposed timetable?

We recommend a longer timetable, especially due to the uncertainty around measuring impact and the need for pilot studies to ensure proven methods in business schools. We would support a census date in 2013/14.

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

We reiterate our comments above:

- Support for three outputs.

- Lack of support for changing the definition of 4*.
- The need for clearer definitions of impact and guidance on case studies.
- A proven methodology in measuring impact effectively, efficiently and sufficiently in a business school context.
- A slightly longer timescale for implementation that allows a pilot study of impact to be conducted in several different business schools as the size of the UoA for business and management is considerable.
- The need to appoint expert scholars on the panel who are able to assess the full range of subjects that are offered by UK business schools, including accounting and finance, economics that is not purely mathematical and statistical, IS, sports research relating to business and management.