

A reply from the Society of Biology to the Consultation on
Draft Panel Criteria and Working Methods for the
Research Excellence Framework 2014
October 2011

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice for biology: advising Government and influencing policy; advancing education and professional development; supporting our members, and engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences. The Society represents a diverse membership of over 80,000 - including practising scientists, students and interested non-professionals - as individuals, or through the learned societies and other organisations listed below.

The Society welcomes this consultation and the opportunity which it affords to comment on the draft panel criteria and working methods.

In general the Society appreciates the intention on the part of the funding councils to promote and accommodate equality and diversity by putting in place procedures and criteria which would allow individual researchers with 'clearly defined' or 'complex' circumstances to return fewer outputs for assessment without penalty. However, we are acutely concerned that proposals to consider maternity leave within this framework impose uncertainty and concern on those researchers affected and will in effect be discriminatory. This would not be acceptable. We therefore strongly urge that the proposal, under Paragraph 62, whereby a reduction by one in returnable outputs is made available for each period of maternity leave within the submission period. We believe that this more accurately reflects the work-associated impact of pregnancy and maternity in most cases and also that the pre-defined clarity of the provision will create a pragmatic and constructive environment for work and career planning.

We welcome the principle in the REF whereby research outputs across the spectrum of applied, practice-based, basic and strategic research carried out in a variety of settings will be considered, in particular this should help to support and value translation research, interdisciplinary working and emerging fields.

Welcome that expert review will be the primary means of assessment and recognition of limited value of citation data for recently published outputs

Consultation questions

1. Overall draft panel criteria and working methods

a. The generic and four main panel statements achieve an appropriate balance between consistency across the exercise and allowing for justifiable differences between the four main panels.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Are there particular aspects of the criteria and working methods that should be more consistent across all the main panels? Are there differences between the disciplines that justify further differentiation between the main panel criteria? Where referring to particular main panels, please state which one(s).

The Criteria definitions set out by Panel B (33) provide helpful clarity. However the category of 'originality' could equally accommodate the kind of incremental innovation necessary to enhance and translate existing knowledge and technology.

2. Individual staff circumstances

a. The proposals for determining the number of outputs that may be reduced without penalty, for staff with a range of individual circumstances, are appropriate (Part 1, Tables 2 and 3).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on these proposals. Respondents are also invited to comment specifically on:

- whether Tables 2 and 3 are set at appropriate levels
- the proposed options for taking account of pregnancy and maternity (Part 1, paragraph 62)
- whether a consistent approach across the exercise is appropriate, or whether there are any specific differences in the nature of research that justify differences in the approach between UOAs or main panels.

If commenting in respect of particular panels or disciplines, please state which.

In general the Society appreciates the intention on the part of the funding councils to promote and accommodate equality and diversity by putting in place procedures and criteria which would allow individual researchers with 'clearly defined' or 'complex' circumstances to return fewer outputs for assessment without penalty. However, we are acutely concerned that proposals to consider maternity leave within this framework impose uncertainty and concern on those researchers affected and will in effect be discriminatory. This would not be acceptable. We therefore strongly urge that the proposal, under Paragraph 62, whereby a reduction by one in returnable outputs is made available for each period of maternity leave within the submission period. We believe that this more accurately reflects the work-associated impact of pregnancy and maternity in most cases and also that the pre-defined clarity of the provision will create a pragmatic and constructive environment for work and career planning.

There are particular circumstances also whereby laboratory work may need to be curtailed during pregnancy or while nursing, because of potential exposure to toxins etc., thus altering a researcher's productivity beyond any absence period.

In addition, the time during the assessment period at which a maternity or other absence occurs may often materially influence productivity for some time thereafter. As such the consequences of an absence early in the assessment window may be greater (or more apparent) than an absence of similar length, later in the period.

For the remaining questions, please provide a separate response for each main panel criteria statement (Parts 2A, 2B, 2C and 2D of this consultation)

Panel A

3. Main panel criteria and working methods

a. The main panel statement achieves an appropriate balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the sub-panels.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the sub-panels within this main panel. Please state the UOA(s) on which you are commenting.

No comment

4. Submissions and units of assessment (Section 1)

a. Do the UOA descriptor and boundary statements provide a clear and appropriate description of the disciplines covered by the UOAs? Please include any suggestions for refining the descriptors and state which UOA(s) you are commenting on.

No comment

b. Please comment on the main panel's criteria in relation to multiple submissions in its UOAs.

No comment

5. Assessment criteria: outputs (Section 2)

a. Overall, the main panel criteria relating to outputs are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 2, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

In relation to the submission and assessment of multi-authored papers a clarification of the criteria by which panels will assess an author to have made a 'material contribution to the research of the author against whom it is listed' (Panel A; 36) would be helpful. A small but enabling contribution to a very many-author paper may need to be judged against significant contribution to a paper of similar impact by a small group of authors. Institutions will need to anticipate the panel's likely judgement in terms of eligibility and in the absence of 'reserve' submissions the risks are considerable. Clarification would be welcome to encourage a suitably uniform approach. We suggest that the panel(s) should publish some fictional examples to assist institutions in their decision-making or concede a right to offer 'reserve outputs.'

6. Assessment criteria: impact (Section 3)

a. Overall, the main panel's criteria relating to impact are appropriate and helpful to institutions in preparing submissions.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 3, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

Insofar as possible, REF judgements should be based on objective, verifiable and (where appropriate)

quantitative measures of past performance, not on rhetoric or unverifiable statements or aspiration.

7. Assessment criteria: environment (Section 4)

a. Overall, the main panel criteria relating to environment are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 4, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

Insofar as possible, REF judgements should be based on objective, verifiable and (where appropriate) quantitative measures of past performance, not on rhetoric or unverifiable statements or aspiration.

8. Working methods (Section 5)

a. Overall, the working methods of the main panel and its sub-panels are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the working methods, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

Panel B

9. Main panel criteria and working methods

a. The main panel statement achieves an appropriate balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the sub-panels.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the sub-panels within this main panel. Please state the UOA(s) on which you are commenting.

No comment

10. Submissions and units of assessment (Section 1)

a. Do the UOA descriptor and boundary statements provide a clear and appropriate description of the disciplines covered by the UOAs? Please include any suggestions for refining the descriptors and state which UOA(s) you are commenting on.

No Comment

b. Please comment on the main panel's criteria in relation to multiple submissions in its UOAs.

No Comment

11. Assessment criteria: outputs (Section 2)

a. Overall, the main panel criteria relating to outputs are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 2, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

In relation to the submission and assessment of multi-authored papers a clarification of the criteria by which panels will assess an author to have made a 'material contribution to the research of the author against whom it is listed' (Panel A: 36;) would be helpful. A small but enabling contribution to a very many-author paper may need to be judged against significant contribution to a paper of similar impact by a small group of authors. Institutions will need to anticipate the panel's likely judgement in terms of eligibility and in the absence of 'reserve' submissions the risks are considerable. Clarification would be welcome to encourage a suitably uniform approach.

We are not certain that the approach outlined sufficiently delineates between those contributions which are small but enabling and those which are time and resource-intensive in the production of multi-author papers. Further guidance from the panels as to the rationale behind this approach outlined in 41 and 42 would be welcome

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12. Assessment criteria: impact (Section 3)

a. Overall, the main panel's criteria relating to impact are appropriate and helpful to institutions in preparing submissions.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 3, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

13. Assessment criteria: environment (Section 4)

a. Overall, the main panel criteria relating to environment are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 4, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

14. Working methods (Section 5)

a. Overall, the working methods of the main panel and its sub-panels are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the working methods, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

Panel C

15. Main panel criteria and working methods

a. The main panel statement achieves an appropriate balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the sub-panels.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the balance between consistency and allowing for discipline-based differences between the sub-panels within this main panel. Please state the UOA(s) on which you are commenting.

We are concerned that sufficient expertise in the biological sciences should be made available through panel members and assessors to accommodate the needs of UOA 26 Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism to accommodate the likely submissions.

16. Submissions and units of assessment (Section 1)

a. Do the UOA descriptor and boundary statements provide a clear and appropriate description of the disciplines covered by the UOAs? Please include any suggestions for refining the descriptors and state which UOA(s) you are commenting on.

No comment

b. Please comment on the main panel's criteria in relation to multiple submissions in its UOAs.

No comment

17. Assessment criteria: outputs (Section 2)

a. Overall, the main panel criteria relating to outputs are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 2, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

18. Assessment criteria: impact (Section 3)

a. Overall, the main panel's criteria relating to impact are appropriate and helpful to institutions in preparing submissions.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 3, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

19. Assessment criteria: environment (Section 4)

a. Overall, the main panel criteria relating to environment are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the criteria in Section 4, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

20. Working methods (Section 5)

a. Overall, the working methods of the main panel and its sub-panels are clear and appropriate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

b. Please comment on the working methods, in particular on where further clarification is required or where refinements could be made.

No comment

Member Organisations of the Society of Biology

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Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour
Association of Applied Biologists
Biochemical Society
Biosciences KTN
Breakspear Hospital
British Andrology Society
British Association for Lung Research
British Association for Psychopharmacology
British Biophysical Society
British Crop Production Council
British Ecological Society
British Lichen Society
British Microcirculation Society
British Mycological Society
British Neuroscience Association
British Pharmacological Society
British Phycological Society
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British Society for Matrix Biology
British Society for Medical Mycology
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British Society for Soil Science
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International Biometric Society
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Marine Biological Association
Nutrition Society
Oxford University Press
Royal Entomological Society
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Science and Plants for Schools
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