Section 1: Volume Measure

The funding body proposes to draw staff data directly from HESA to calculate the volume measure, using an average staff FTE over Academic Years (AYs) 25/26 and 26/27 (piloted in AY 24/25).

Q5. What practical challenges may institutions face in implementing these changes

In this and each of the following responses, we appreciate that many of the terms for a future REF are now fixed. Our focus therefore is on implementation and outcomes, with a focus on concerns about unforeseen consequences and proposals for mitigating the effects of these.

We are concerned here about:

1. the timetable for determining volume measure
2. the accuracy and comprehensiveness of HESA data as a calculation for volume measure
3. applications of this data, and the scope for certain UoAs and institutions to game the system to their advantage.

1. Timetable: we understand that HESA census date 2 occurs on 31 July 2027, which is 4 months before the end of the submission phase. This leaves very little time to determine the number of outputs and Impact Case Studies (ICS) required by a UoA. Given this very short timescale, there is a strong possibility that some UoAs / institutions may manipulate the volume measure at census date 2 to align with the number of ICS a UoA seeks to submit by mid 2027.

The existence of two census dates, rather than an average between these dates, leaves the final volume calculation open to manipulation. The HE sector is experiencing significant turbulence at
present, especially for History and other Humanities disciplines; chances for accurate long term predictions remain very challenging.

2. **Accuracy of data**: HESA staff record data are known to be weak and partial, being reliant on institutions to provide data returns that are themselves open to manipulation for other measures of success / failure. From a disciplinary perspective, we are concerned by the limitations of HESA data to capture the breadth of historical research that occurs within many departments beyond those specifically devoted to History. Historians range widely, and there are risks of people being overlooked given the requirement to allocate people to a HESA determined UoA so close to the submission phase. As with 1 above, these inaccuracies also create opportunities for manipulation of the submission.

3. **Applications of data**: There is currently no disincentive not to include people when you can submit their outputs anyway. This currently leaves open the option for staff without Significant Responsibility for Research (SRR) to have their outputs submitted with no risk to the UoA.

- **Within UoAs**, selected institutions will be able to draw on a deeper pool of people to increase the total number of outputs. UoAs capable of doing so are in larger, richer institutions; this flexibility will not be available to smaller UoAs, already struggling and therefore risks perpetuating inequalities of reward based on UoA scale and profile.
- **Between Arts and Humanities (History) and STEM**, this challenge is replicated between disciplinary categories. As with other AHSS subjects, History volume is invariably static or slow to move; this is at odds with STEM where it will be easier to bring in additional people who offer additional outputs of a consistently high quality. From the perspective of an institution, additional STEM outputs are worth considerably more in QR funding than for Humanities, and we are concerned this will lead central management to privilege volume within STEM, generating an enforced imbalance that belies and threatens the international reputation and status of History, as it will other UoAs in Main Panel D.

We need to avoid inherent discrepancies between AHSS and STEM being further exacerbated. There is a risk that proposals for REF20228 will distort future representations and perceptions of the UK HE sector to the detriment of AHSS. This risks undermining the influence, prestige and power of UK AHSS in a global context, with serious potential implications for the entire UK HE sector and UK economy.

**Q6. How might the funding bodies mitigate these challenges?**

We propose the following five mitigations:

- **eligible contract lengths should be increased from 0.2FTE for 6 months to a minimum of 0.2FTE for a minimum of 12 months, with a minimum 0.2FTE component devoted to research allocation. Anything less risks manipulation of the volume measure and available outputs at census date 2. We need to avoid a situation that risks further increase in short-term contracts which, when applied to ECRs, further intensifies precarity, and lessens the attractiveness of the discipline and profession to promising early career historians.**
- **without this new minimum we are concerned that REF2028 will further exacerbate a highly turbulent and unpredictable sector in which long-term planning is currently impossible. This will have significant consequences for a UoA’s capacity to plan beyond the academic year; it also has serious implications for staff at risk of being released after the census date 2.**
we propose that UoAs offer a statement on how their volume measure has been calculated, as well as their selection of outputs; plus, a clear statement from the UoA on how staff without SRR, whose outputs are submitted, will be rewarded. We are concerned to protect the status and career development of staff whose research may be used while they are not receiving any current, and are not guaranteed any future, support for research.

we do not object to the zero measure for outputs providing that all non-SRR staff are excluded from the volume measurement, while all staff with SRR are required to be included in this measurement.

introducing a quality rule tolerance in the HESA data to allow staff to be moved to a different Unit of Assessment during the relevant academic years would help ensure the inclusion of historians whose institutional location is not within a History department (e.g. business historians operating in a Business School).

Q7. What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics or other underrepresented groups

HESA staff record data do not include all designated protected characteristics. This will make it very difficult to gain anonymised measures of these data, and without this it remains impossible to measure how useful (or otherwise) this proposal is for supporting researchers with protected characteristics.

We see the changes as positive insofar as they remove the circumstances element of REF2021 (relating to individual researchers) and the need for a case to be made for not having submittable outputs. Conceivably, if a disproportionate number of researchers with protected characteristics or from under-represented groups were adversely affected by the requirement for one output to be submitted to REF2021 then this could be of benefit to them.

However, allowing the submission of outputs from staff without significant responsibility for research may create new problems for precarious researchers as it dis-incentivises institutions from moving them onto SRR contracts or otherwise providing meaningful recognition and support for their research. This creates a risk that universities will restrict the benefits of the award of significant responsibility for research to established academics who are believed to produce high quality outputs. It seems likely that adversely affected staff would include disproportionate numbers of researchers with protected characteristics or from under-represented groups.

Section Two: Output Submission

The funding bodies propose to fully break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions.

Q8. What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics or other underrepresented groups?

We are concerned that breaking the link between individual staff members and unit submissions will exacerbate differences (and disparities) between staff on teaching-only and research or research-and-teaching contracts. This will have detrimental consequences to certain groups of staff: those at
early career, and especially those at mid-career seeking to begin a major new research project; plus, those with protected characteristics and who are currently underrepresented in the discipline.

Our primary concern is the provision for the submission of an unlimited maximum of outputs by single individuals, which risks concentrating research in the hands of a small number of ‘star performers’. To cultivate this, institutions will exacerbate existing divergence between research-based and other forms of contract that offer, at best, nominal research time / study leave. We see this as having a negative impact especially on mid-career researchers with limited capacity to start new projects following completion of PhD projects and publishing from this.

In mitigation, we recommend the imposition of an upper limit of submissible outputs per FTE of volume-contributing staff. We propose that this upper limit is determined by the four Main Panels during the criteria setting phase. This would help facilitate a more equitable distribution of submitted outputs across a UoA.

Q9. What impact would these changes have on institutions in preparing output submissions? For example, what may be the unintended consequences of allowing the submission of outputs produced by those on non-academic or teaching-only contracts?

We are very concerned at the potential for exploitation that will result from the inclusion of outputs from those on non-academic or teaching-only contracts. It is very unlikely that these staff are currently receiving support for their research. If this continues it will leave those on such contracts vulnerable to pressures to publish what is in effect independent work, produced without support or guarantee of reward.

A related concern is that these staff will likely be disproportionately involved in the production of ‘non-traditional’ outputs that will be utilised for the narrative statement about the Unit’s wider contribution to knowledge and understanding that will form 10% of the profile for the Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding element.

These considerations may therefore encourage UoAs, particularly those in richer institutions, to invest funds that might otherwise have been used to support research into establishing further teaching-only and non-academic positions. This risks exacerbating precarity among researchers, and perpetuating the divisions between financially buoyant and financially-challenged institutions. Even within those units in which most staff are contracted to undertake research, UoAs could be incentivised to foster an unequal research culture, with resources concentrated upon a few favoured scholars.

One valuable mitigation in this context would be to move the narrative explanatory statement regarding the broader contribution to knowledge and understanding into the People, Culture and Environment section, or to incorporate it into the explanatory statement on the broader contribution to society and the economy in the Engagement and Impact section.

This would have the advantage of enabling the well-established assessment criteria for research excellence of rigour, originality and significance to be applied consistently across all the outputs submitted within the Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding. Should the narrative statement remain within the Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding section, it will require the development of new and different criteria to establish what is considered a suitable ‘non-traditional’ output and how these can be equitably assessed.
Q10. Should outputs sole-authored by postgraduate research students be eligible for submission? If so, should this include PhD theses?

No. We are very strongly opposed to both these elements. For History, the PhD and other supervised postgraduate research outputs are expected to be independent pieces of work that are the outcome of the student’s own original design, in contrast to most PGR research undertaken within the science disciplines. Inclusion of such outputs at this stage of an ECR’s career risks significantly damaging their later chances of publication and their ability to secure employment in an already highly precarious environment.

This proposal has significant ethical dimensions. It risks UoAs appropriating work funded by the researcher with no guarantee of reward in return (indeed the reverse) which we consider exploitative; it creates a danger that History students might be pressured into premature publication of their individual and sole-authored research; it removes the moral basis for how historians supervise and nurture PhDs.

The potential damage of including postgraduate research students / PhDs in output assessment is heightened by the apparent non-portability of outputs, given the new break in the linkage between outputs and the individual researcher.

Q11. What would be appropriate indicators of a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution?

The eligible contract length should be increased from 0.2FTE for 6 months to a minimum of 0.2FTE for a minimum of 12 months. In addition, the minimum 0.2FTE component should be devoted to research allocation. Anything less risks manipulation of the volume measure and available outputs at census date 2. These dangers were amply demonstrated during REF2014, when many staff were appointed on short-term contracts just prior to the submission date, leading to a redesign of the eligibility criteria in REF2021. It is important to avoid encouraging distortions in what is already a volatile and constrained job market for historians.

We seek greater clarity on the portability of outputs given REF2028’s break with the linkage of these to individual staff members. The current guidance offers nothing that we can see on portability or grace period aside from a sentence (para 74) on ‘allowing staff to move between institutions and sectors with no detriment to their careers.’

Greater detail on portability of outputs is especially important for historians, given the long creation time for articles and monographs that are typically the work of a single author. We are concerned to avoid unintended consequences that have negative impact on mobility, existing precarity, and career sustainability for those in our discipline. This applies to historians at different career stages but is most acute at early career when movement and precarity are greatest.

Q12. Do the proposed arrangements for co-authored outputs strike the right balance between supporting collaboration and ensuring that assessment focuses on the work of the unit?

The importance of at least double weighting books needs to be taken into account.
Allowing two authors from different institutions to both submit the output is welcome, but given the time commitment involved, a co-authored volume from two members within the same UoA also needs to be double-weighted at a minimum to reflect the input involved.

Collaboration within an UoA is - in History - less often a diminution of individual research time and effort per person than it is for a larger team project in another discipline. This is especially so in relation to co-researching and co-authoring of monographs. Final REF2028 guidelines need to better incentivise collaboration within a UoA given the new focus is on the unit rather than the individual. Double-weighting for co-authored monographs produced within a UoA is a minimum for this.

Most historians would argue that double weighting undervalues the extra work involved in the preparation of monographs / books rather than articles.

Q13. Are there any further considerations around co-authored outputs that need to be taken into account?

Nothing more to add here.

Section Three: Impact Case Studies

The funding bodies propose to reduce the minimum number of impact case studies required to one. They also propose to revise the boundaries, including splitting the lowest boundary. The funding bodies are particularly keen to hear the views of institutions with small units.

Q14. What will be the impact of reducing the minimum number to one?

We welcome the move to a minimum of one Impact Case Study (ICS), especially for UoAs of less than 9.99FTE of volume contributing staff, and also the requirement for increased numbers of case studies as volume measure increases. We also welcome the reintroduction of an explanatory statement.

However, we are concerned about the following potential consequences of this move:

- the late decision date for the volume measure, as currently based on census dates taking place in AY 26/27; this will leave little time to identify an additional ICS if the volume measure exceeds the <9.99FTE threshold: a situation that also applies to all UoAs on FTE threshold borders.
- exposure of researcher/s responsible for a sole ICS in small UoAs and heightened scrutiny from their UoA and/or institution. We encourage the development of advice and processes that mitigate this risk as far as possible.
- we also seek confirmation that the impact statement will not draw on the single ICS of a smaller UoA; but rather will address the activity of the wider unit. This is important both to minimise burdens placed on those responsible for a single ICS, and to permit broader discussion of a UoA’s contribution to impact alongside a chosen case study.

With the loss of a required 2* quality of underpinning research to support an ICS, we are concerned that the statement requires clear demonstration of links between research activity and impact. Demonstrating the importance of research within an institution as a basis for effective
impact/engagement in wider society is essential for History, where it is now common to celebrate popular approaches to the discipline while not acknowledging the academic work on which these depend.

We ask that a clear definition and measurement of the substantive connection to, and rigour of, underpinning research be developed now that the 2* requirement will no longer apply, while accepting, in addition, appreciation that effective impact may be generated in a non-linear relationship with research.

Q15. What will be the impact of revising the thresholds between case study requirements?

We welcome the limitation to one ICS for departments of less than 9.99FTE of volume contributing staff. This reduces a very real burden faced by smaller departments, widely discussed after REF2021. We also accept the need for threshold sizes to increase as FTE rises. Within History, we expect a very great number of UoAs to be submitting between 1 and 4 ICS for REF2028 and see the proposed ratio between required ICS and FTE as proportionate.

We raise again concerns that the lateness of census date 2 will make it very difficult for UoAs on threshold boundaries to respond quickly if an additional case study is required.

We also note that inherent differences between AHSS and STEM (and the scope for high volume of impact in the latter) does not result in excessive negative distortion of the presentation and perception of AHSS in UK HE.

Q16. To what extent do you support weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies submitted?

We support weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale. The statement is an important summary of a UoA’s activities in the round, in addition to the submitted ICS. We are also keen that assessment is based on the quality, rather than any measure of the quantity, of impact work undertaken to ensure that smaller units are not penalised for their lack of capacity relative to larger units.

We support a minimum weight for the impact statement, currently 20%, regardless of FTE of volume-contributing staff.

Section Four: Unit of Assessment

*The funding bodies propose to retain the REF 2021 Unit of Assessment structure. The funding bodies invite views from disciplinary communities and institutions on any disciplinary developments since REF 2021 that would require changes to be made to the UOA structure.*

Q17. If the UOA structure is relevant to you/your organisation, please indicate clearly any changes that you propose to the UOA structure and provide your rationale and any evidence to support your proposal.
No changes proposed to the UoA structure. However, we note the following three concerns relating to the History UoA:

- that HESA staff record data are currently insufficient to capture historians working in the discipline across an institution and beyond departmental boundaries. This is particularly acute for historians who work widely across AHSS and STEM, e.g. in law, business and medical schools.
- it is critical that the assessment of the People, Culture and Environment section in particular is carried out in relation to the size and type of institution. If not, it will be very difficult for small units to do well, making the argument for a single Humanities submission more plausible, to the significant detriment of the History discipline and its staff. We strongly propose that the final requirements allow for difference, so that both large and small UoAs can be ranked as excellent, as the best mitigation for this.
- we are very keen to ensure this same appreciation of size, between institutions, is also recognised in assessment of the institutional-level statement for People, Culture and Environment. It is vital that outstanding research excellence achieved by units in less well-resourced institutional environments is fully recognised.

Section Five: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The funding bodies intend to retain the statements on Covid impact that were used in REF 2021, and to require some consideration of how Covid impacts have been addressed in output selection as part of Codes of Practice.

Q18. What is your view on the proposed measures to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

We welcome the suggestion that Covid impacts be recognised as a factor in the selection of outputs for REF 2028.

We propose that the continued impact of Covid should also be recognised as a factor in the preparation of ICSSs, given our increasing appreciation of the effects of ‘long Covid’. Evidence suggesting that Covid impacted strongly on those with parenting and caring responsibilities should also be noted here.

Q19. What other measures should the funding bodies consider to take into account the impact of the covid pandemic?

Nothing substantive to add here.