Royal Historical Society response to the ‘Research Excellence Framework 2029 open access consultation’

Submitted: 12 June 2024

Following publication of the REF2029 open access consultation (18 March 2024), the Royal Historical Society has submitted the following responses to the 19 questions posed by REF.

The consultation covers 3 sections: A. ‘Open access developments in the sector’; B: ‘Journal articles and conference proceedings’; and C. ‘Longform outputs (monographs, book chapters and edited collections)’. Responses are limited to 3000 characters for Question 4 and 1500 characters for all other questions with a text field.

SECTION A: Open access developments in the sector

4. What are the most important changes in the open access landscape since the development of the REF 2021 open access policy? 1) How do these differ across disciplinary areas? 2) What are the implications of these changes for the REF 2029 open access policy?

Here the Society focuses on the OA landscape as it relates to REF’s proposals to extend OA mandates to book publishing for REF2029 which is a key concern for historians represented by the Royal Historical Society.

- There has been very little development in the infrastructure for OA book publishing since REF2021. Diamond OA publishing initiatives remain very small in size, and will be impossible to scale to anything like the levels required to support the proposals for REF2029. Here we speak as a longstanding advocate of sustainable open access publishing, and owner of a successful monograph series, ‘New Historical Perspectives’, published Diamond OA.
Questions of scale are crucial for History. Of the 4,418 assessed outputs for UoA 28 ‘History’ (REF2021), 55% were of the kind in scope for potential Open Access publication to qualify for future REFs (34% monographs, 15% book chapters, and 6% edited collections and scholarly editions). The centrality of book publishing for History means the proposals for REF2029 will have a disproportionate—and, we believe, disproportionately negative—impact on our discipline.

There has been very limited development in Green Route options for book publishing—both in terms of engagement with publishers, and what they permit in terms of repository deposit; and the capacity to cater for the number of titles that will be required to follow the Green Route, given the absence of additional funding to support immediate OA publication by publishers.

The Society is concerned these requirements and limitations are not yet sufficiently appreciated as REF seeks to extend the scope of open access mandates for 2029.

A recent survey Society members (May 2024) further highlights concern and dissatisfaction, among historians, with REF’s proposals for OA book publishing:

- Asked about the importance of publishing future books open access, 75% of respondents chose ‘0-2’ on a scale of ‘0’ (not at all) to ‘5’ (considerably). 60% of all respondents offered no opinion on importance.

- 65% stated they were unwilling to have the text of their book deposited in a repository, or did not know how to answer this question.

- In addition, responses on REF more generally show clear dissatisfaction over a growing imbalance between the labour involved in REF versus the diminishing returns for a successful performance.

The Society therefore sees REF2029’s OA proposals as going too far, too fast. While welcoming and encouraging sustainable OA publishing, the Society calls for REF2029’s extended Open Access proposals to be postponed for the forthcoming assessment cycle.

**SECTION B: Journal articles and conference proceedings**

5. Should deposit requirements post acceptance be maintained where publication isn’t immediately open access?

We have no comment here.
6. Do you agree with alignment to the UKRI open access policy in respect of licensing for journal publications by requiring licensing terms equivalent to CC-BY or CC-BY-ND licensing for journal publications?

No.

What, if any, negative or positive impacts might there be from this change?

We see no positive benefit for authors / readers in dropping the option of CC BY NC ND which was valid for REF2021—either for the discovery or the legitimate use of research content. The loss of the option CC BY NC ND further risks selected journals being out of scope for authors, or limits the potential use of third-party material in the final text.

As noted above (4), publishing articles open access in the most suitable (including non-UK based) journals is already extremely challenging for historians. Further limiting of options, which will result from mandating more permissive licenses, will have no positive impact on the future communication and use of historical research. We recommend that authors of journal articles have the same range of licensing options as is currently proposed in REF’s proposals for books, and that final decisions rest with the author and/or publisher.

7. Do you agree with recognition of alternative platforms as meeting open access requirements as primary platform for publication?

Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No.

We presume this question refers to the availability of journal articles via online repositories, with deposit either of an Author Accepted Manuscript or Version of Record. The concept of open access publishing is most fully established for journal publishing, and institutional repositories are a known feature of this landscape. However, use of repositories by historians to discover and download content remains very limited.

Though less expensive than immediate OA publication, repositories also carry significant financial and environmental costs in terms of administration, metadata preparation, oversight and hosting. This is significant for institutions. These costs would very significantly increase were repositories required to cater for book publishing for REF2029. We see no evidence of an appreciation by REF of the costs of this for institutions. There is no evidence that the goals of those driving the REF2029 OA programme would be met using the repository option.

8. Do you agree with the proposed changes to embargo periods for journal publications for main panels A and B (12 months reduced to six months) and main panels C and D (24 months reduced to 12 months), in light of changing standards and practice?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No.

What, if any, negative or positive impacts might there be from this change?

A maximum embargo period of 12 months for Main Panel D (including History) is too short as a blanket upper limit for a complex journal infrastructure. Future REF policy must appreciate the importance for humanities scholarship of smaller-scale journals published by learned and record societies and academic institutions.

Income from these publications is central to such organizations which are central to supporting and communicating historical research. Any reduction of the current embargo period further threatens this income stream, already in decline, and with it the work of subject specialist societies and organizations that sustain the discipline in numerous ways.

In addition, any reduction of article embargo periods further limits options for UK-based historians seeking to publish in non-UK based journals that may be the most suitable options for their research. We do not believe that any equivalent benefits to scholarship will arise from reducing the embargo period to 12 months.

9. Do you agree that changes to the open access policy for journal-based publications should be implemented from 1 January 2025?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No comment.

Please provide any further comment

N/A

10. Do you consider that tolerance limit for articles and conference proceedings should be retained at 5% of any submission?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No comment.

Please provide any further comment

11. Do you agree with the proposed exceptions for journal publications?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

Yes
Should any of the above be removed?

We do not propose any removals.

What, if any, additional exceptions might be required?

N/A

12. Do you agree that there should be no deposit requirement for longform publications, but that they should be made immediately available as open access upon publication (or no later than 24 months following publication if subject to an embargo)?

Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No comment

Please provide further comment

There was no deposit requirement for monographs etc. in REF 2021 and we recommend that none is mandated for REF2029. The Society does not accept that the alternative to this non-existent policy should require that books be made available open access, either immediately on publication or via a repository after an embargo period.

13. Do you agree with the proposal of a maximum embargo period of 24 months for longform publications?

Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No.

Please provide any further comment

The Society is opposed to REF2029’s mandatory requirements for books that include submission to repositories, regardless of the duration of the embargo period.

Identification of 24 months is determined as the time by which, REF estimates, 70% of print sales of a chosen book will have taken place. No evidence is provided to substantiate this claim, while many publishers argue for a much longer half-life for History books. The 70% figure is further problematic: for publishers to lose 30% of sales revenue, and authors 30% of royalty income, is not acceptable for either party.

The Society’s survey of members (May 2024) makes clear that historians intending to submit to REF2029 would be unwilling to deposit monographs and other book content in repositories, regardless of the length of an embargo. 65% of those who responded to this question stated
they were unwilling to have their book deposited in a repository or did not know how to answer this question.

SECTION C: Longform outputs (monographs, book chapters and edited collections)

14. Is licensing for third party materials not being granted a reasonable ground for exemption from open access requirements?

Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

Yes.

Please provide any further comment

Third-party materials are integral to the scholarly quality and integrity of a monograph and related works. An inability to reproduce third-party materials in full should mean a work, as a whole, is exempt from REF open access requirements.

15. Is sharing of a version of an output without third-party materials if licensing can’t be obtained, mirroring the UKRI open access policy for longform outputs, appropriate to meet the open access requirements for REF 2029 policy?

Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No.

Does this present issues for output submission and assessment?

See above, 14 on the importance of retaining the integrity of the published work as a whole.

16. Do you agree with the principle of a tolerance level for non-compliant longform outputs?

Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No comment.

Please provide any further comment

The Society opposes the mandatory publication of monographs, and other works, in open access formats for REF2029. It therefore offers no comment on the existence of a tolerance level.
17. Do you agree with the proposed tolerance level of 10% for longform outputs?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No comment.

Please provide any further comment

See above, 16.

18. Do you agree with the proposed date for implementation of an open access policy for longform outputs in REF 2029 being for all longform publications for which contracts are agreed from 1 January 2026?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

No comment.

The Society opposes the mandatory publication of monographs, and other works, in open access formats for REF2029. It therefore offers no comment on the proposed implementation date for a process it does not believe should be a feature of REF2029.
The Society has long campaigned for—and practiced—sustainable and responsible forms of open access publishing, for journal and other forms of scholarly content. We therefore appreciate and encourage the benefits of open access scholarship, but also require this to be aligned with the wider research and publishing landscapes.

Sustainable open access publishing for books requires full participation from the full range of publishers, universities and librarians. It requires the participation of authors, the majority of whom (as the Society’s recent survey indicates) do not consider OA as a primary goal when publishing monographs, and do not welcome (as authors or readers) options such as repository deposit. The Society sees no evidence that sufficient engagement with the academic infrastructure and community is taking place. We therefore propose that requirements for open access for ‘longform publishing’ be removed from REF2029 to enable this engagement to take place to identify the benefits sustainable OA may in future bring to humanities scholarship.

19. Do you agree with the proposed exceptions for longform publications?
Yes / No / Not sure / No comment

Yes.

Should any of the above be removed?

The Society agrees with the proposed exemptions and does not recommend removing any of these.
Are there other exceptions you think are necessary for longform outputs? Please provide evidence in support.

The Society is very concerned that Scholarly Editions remain in scope for open access publication under the current proposals. REF notes that the terms of any open access requirement for 2029 will not exceed those currently applied to books and other works funded by UKRI. UKRI regulations state that ‘scholarly editions’ are ‘out of scope’ for open access when funded by UKRI. REF OA policy is therefore at odds with that for UKRI research-funded publications.

Scholarly editions are a very important element of scholarly culture in the humanities and facilitate future research. Many notable series are published in the UK by learned societies which do not have the infrastructure or financial resources to support open access publication by editors submitting to the REF. Were this requirement to remain, REF risks severely damaging scholarly edition publishing in the UK. We therefore urge REF to add scholarly editions to the list of exceptions in line with UKRI policy.

More broadly, the Society believes REF’s OA proposals for book publishing go too far, too fast. We are concerned that mandating these proposals will alienate humanities academics, and their support networks, and risks delegitimizing REF as a measure and reward of research excellence in the opinion of those it seeks to assess. We therefore recommend that REF’s OA proposals for books are not mandated for the next research exercise; rather the next cycle is used to explore sustainable future models that increase access to high-quality research.