

Vitae response to the consultation on the Research Excellence Framework 2009

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Vitae is a national organisation championing the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes.
- 1.2 In November 2009 comments were invited on the proposed REF from Vitae's network of staff supporting the development of researchers. This network includes staff working in training and development functions, human resources, careers services and research offices in higher education institutions and research institutes across the UK. Vitae also attempted to engage its growing network of research staff contacts in this exercise. Following the first Vitae research staff conference on 5 November 2009, delegates were invited to contribute to Vitae's response to the REF, as were visitors to the Vitae research staff blog.
- 1.3 This document is based on written responses to these requests and discussion at relevant meetings.

2 Key features of the REF

- 2.1 Vitae welcomes the emphasis on enhancing the potential impact of excellent research, and of improving quality across the HE research base. However, we would argue that in its current format, the proposed REF does not place enough emphasis on building research capacity and developing research skills. Of particular concern is the proposal that research impact should be weighted more highly than research environment. We would argue that this is inconsistent with the view *that 'maintaining the capacity of the HE sector to produce world-leading research [...] is essential to underpin economic growth and national well-being'* (p4).
- 2.2 Vitae fully supports the aims of research assessment as outlined in points 14 and 15. We would argue that aim 'a' should be strengthened and better reflected in the proposals for the REF; in particular, that *'driving up quality across the research base'* may be measured, in part, by the attempts within the HE sector to build research capacity. We also welcome aim 'f', to *'support better management and sustainability of the research base'*, and suggest that this point is expanded upon and measured, with reference to clear criteria, in the assessment of research environment.

3 Assessing outputs

- 3.1 The more inclusive definition of staff eligible to be included in submissions under the REF (p9, 33.a) has the potential to ensure that the contribution of research staff will receive greater recognition than it may have done in previous research assessment exercises. We would, however, suggest that further clarity is required regarding the categories of staff eligible to be returned, particularly as staff on research-only contracts would qualify as 'academic staff' in some higher education institutions but not in others.

4 Assessing research environment

- 4.1 As above, we suggest that in its current format the proposed assessment of research environment does not fully address the need to measure the management, sustainability and enhancement of the research base. In particular we are concerned that there is no indication within the proposals of how the capacity building/researcher development elements of research environment will be weighted relative to the other components such as resourcing and engagement.
- 4.2 Furthermore, we would argue that there needs to be clearer links between the REF and the implementation of the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, given that this latter agreement originated from a recognition that *'high quality training, support and management processes have the potential to maximise the output and impact of research'* (p2).
- 4.3 The proposals note that submissions should provide evidence on the support available for early career researchers. We would argue that submissions should also be assessed against the support that is provided to new principal investigators and research managers.
- 4.4 We would argue that the assessment of *'the extent to which the submitted unit has developed a research infrastructure and a range of supporting activity, conducive to a continuing flow of excellent research and its effective dissemination and application'* (p7) should be broadened to include a *'flow of excellent research **and researchers**'*.

5 Assessing impact

- 5.1 This aspect of the current proposal generated the most discussion among the research staff consulted. Whilst there was general agreement regarding the appropriateness of assessing the impact of publically-funded research, there was considerable debate about how this can and should be measured. We support the proposal that the definition of 'impact' be as broad as possible, and includes impacts of a 'social, public policy, cultural' nature (p17), but would argue that the absence of a clear methodology for measuring these should lead to 'impact' receiving a lower weighting than currently proposed.

6 Approach to ensuring consistency between panels

- 6.1 Whilst we support the proposal that *'panels be given flexibility in the assessment of environment'* we suggest that panels should be given clear guidance with regard to assessing the development of researchers and the management of the research base. We would argue that the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers would provide a useful basis for this.

7 Researcher mobility

- 7.1 Further clarification is required as to what 'researcher mobility' constitutes. For example, the use of short-term employment contracts for researchers could lead to overall increases in turnover within a department but we would argue that interpreting this as a measure of *'encouraging and supporting researcher mobility'* (p25) would serve to undermine the stated aim of supporting *'better management and sustainability of the research base'* (p5).

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About Vitae www.vitae.ac.uk

Vitae is a national organisation championing the personal, professional and career development of postgraduate researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes. We play a major role in the drive for high-level skills and innovation and in the UK's goal to produce world class researchers. Our vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers. Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK), managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities. www.vitae.ac.uk